

Khristo
Botev

Khristo Botev

Unesco



Vladimir Topencharov

Khristo BOTEV



Unesco

IN THIS SERIES

La vie et l'œuvre de Miroslav Krleža, contemporary Yugoslav writer (in French).

Francisk Skorina, originator of printing in Byelorussia (in English and French).

Alexander Pushkin, the greatest Russian poet (in English and French).

Ladislav Novomesky, contemporary Slovak poet (in French).

Vítězslav Nezval, contemporary Czech poet (in French).

Christo Botev, nineteenth-century Bulgarian poet (in English and French).

This series is published
in collaboration with the International
Association for the Study
and Dissemination of Slav Cultures

Published in 1982
by the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization,
7 place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris
Printed by Imprimerie
des Presses Universitaires de France, Vendôme

ISBN 92-3-101489-7
French edition: 92-3-201489-0

© Unesco 1982
Printed in France

PREFACE

In the context of Unesco's project for the study of Slav cultures, a number of monographs are being published under the general title of 'Prominent Figures of Slav Culture'. This volume is devoted to Khristo Botev, a nineteenth-century Bulgarian poet, and was prepared by Professor Vladimir Topencharov of the Academy of Sciences of Bulgaria.

The author is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this book and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of Unesco and do not commit the Organization.

CONTENTS

A tree felled in the forest near Paris	9
A genius born of five centuries	17
Poetry takes hold	26
Love and the poet	32
The poet and the rousing word	39
The lash of history	50
Alive or dead, we shall remain	62
The prayer of reason	69
The crossing to immortality	74
He's alive still	82
Biographical notes	85

A TREE FELLED IN THE FOREST NEAR PARIS

ON 2 June 1942, at the height of the Second World War, the Nazis felled a tree that had been growing for hundreds of years in the Forest of Chaville near Paris. It was a plum tree with reddish-brown foliage, which stood in the middle of a large clearing edged with branching hornbeams.

Strangely enough, this tree had become involved in the war and in the conflict of ideas.

After the gloomy spring of 1923, when fascism attacked Bulgaria, many freedom-loving Bulgarian patriots left their native country. Some of them arrived in Paris and settled there. The memory of the land of their birth soon gave rise to a poignant tradition: they used to meet every year in the Forest of Chaville on the first Sunday after 2 June, the date on which the Bulgarian people commemorate the poet Khristo Botev, who fell in 1876 in a bloody battle to deliver his country from five centuries of oppression, and who left for all eternity his lyrical lines hymning the immortality of those who had laid down their lives on the altar of freedom. The exiles remembered his poems, having heard them from the cradle—Bulgarian mothers sing them so as to instil a courageous attitude

to life and the love of freedom in their children—and the forest on the outskirts of Paris brought to them the echo of these lines:

He does not die who falls in battle,
Fighting for freedom. Everything mourns him,
Both earth and heaven, wild beast and nature,
And of him minstrels sing their songs.¹

With their famous refrain:

He's alive, he's alive.

The exiles had discovered the clearing by chance. They had liked the great leafy tree that rose in the centre of it, while the surrounding forest recalled the green mountain-side of the Stara Planina, where the bard's crimson life-blood had been spilt. Nostalgically, they sang of their sorrow, and of their hope to see their country again—their country that was once more downtrodden and humiliated under the fascist jackboot.

Every year found them thus assembled, in pensive mood, and the tradition was kept up during the Nazi occupation.

But now the Bulgarians, singing of freedom with even greater sorrow, were joined by French people from the neighbourhood or on a Sunday outing from Paris. And all, whether exiled or occupied, took up in unison the refrain: 'He's alive, he's alive!'

1. *Translator's note:* The French versions of extracts from Botev's poems quoted by the author are those of Paul Éluard in *Christo Botev: poèmes*, adaptation de Paul Éluard, Sofia Presse. The English versions quoted in this translation are taken from *Kristo Botev: Poems*, edited by Marco Mincoff, Narodna kultura, Sofia, 1955, with occasional minor changes to bring the text closer to the Bulgarian original in *Khristo Botev: Stikhotvoreniya, publitsistika, pisma*, Sofia, B'lgarski Pisatel, 1978.

On 2 June 1942 a Nazi commando cut down the tree. Those who happened to witness this deed in the heart of the forest remember the methodical axe strokes of the soldiers, who first cut off the crown of the beautiful tree like a head on the executioner's block, and then sawed up the trunk and tore out the roots . . . The purple leaves were scattered through the clearing like drops of blood.

But traditions survive the loss of things.

On 2 June the following year in the very place where the tree had been felled, there streamed in the wind two tricolour flags, one French and the other Bulgarian.

No one ever knew who had stuck them in at the edge of the gaping hole. After the war, a fir tree was planted to replace the massacred plum tree. Twenty years later it lifted skywards, its silvery needles waving in the wind like a fountain.

Often in recent years, on the first Sunday after 2 June, I have spoken of Khristo Botev in the Chaville clearing, by the reincarnated tree. Most of the Bulgarian emigrants returned to their country when it became a people's republic after the Second World War. Those who have stayed on in Paris, married and with ties in France, still look homeward with deep-rooted nostalgia and sing the songs of their country. The tradition today is slightly different: the Bulgarians come to the forest with their children, who are already familiar with Botev's poems in the French translation done by Paul Éluard. Indeed, one of the first books to be published, in post-war Paris, by that poet of the French resistance movement, was a selection of *Poèmes de Christo Botev*: Éluard kept them in his heart throughout the five long years of the European tragedy, and hastened to let French readers feel the breath of freedom blowing through them.

In London, Mercia MacDermott published *The*

Apostle of Freedom, a book on Vasil Levski, the organizer of the Bulgarian nationalist movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. This English woman of letters calls Khristo Botev the 'universal bard of freedom'.

The poetry of Khristo Botev has long been known beyond the national frontiers of Bulgaria. Today it belongs to all mankind. In the poet's lifetime his work was already known to Hungarian patriots, while Hungary was itself oppressed by foreign domination. In 1886, scarcely ten years after the death of Botev, the Croatian poet August Harambašić translated these poems: they went straight to the hearts of the Croatian patriots fighting against the national oppressor. Harambašić himself wrote a revolutionary song entitled 'Prayer' containing this quatrain:

And if I fall, if I succumb,
Be not sad, and do not weep,
But say to all those dear to me,
That I have fallen for liberty . . .

which recalls the lines by Botev:

If they should tell you that I
have fallen, pierced by a bullet,
Even then, mother, do not weep
. . . .
Go home and tell my young brothers
Straight from your heart how it happened,
So that they may know and remember
That their brother fell in a distant place
Because, poor fellow, he could not
Bow down his head
. . . .
Tell them too to remember . . .
'He died, poor fellow, for Justice,
For the cause of Justice and Freedom'.

In 1891 the man of letters V. Jensen of Berlin translated the poems of Khristo Botev into German, and emphasized their European implications. In 1914, the Paris newspaper *L'Orient*, in a translation by Marthe Henriette Nolot and the Bulgarian student Ivan Kristanov, published couplets from the poem by Botev through which runs the refrain: 'He's alive, he's alive!' and the young students of Grenoble sang them as an echo to the *Marseillaise*. The living breath of Botev's works runs through a century of history. *He's Alive, He's Alive!* became the Bulgarian students' anthem. In 1908 they sang it as they protested against the Prince of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who had scrambled on to the throne of the Bulgarian kings; and it was to the tune of that anthem that the Bulgarian people banished the usurper after the First World War. Singing *He's Alive, He's Alive!*, in the 1930s, students of the University of Sofia drove out Professor Alexander Tsankov, who had been the ringleader of the fascist coup d'état in 1923—the same Tsankov that Henri Barbusse had dubbed 'the bloody professor' in his book *Les Bourreaux*.

Europe would once again hear the name and the verses of Botev in the worst years of tension and anguish in the Second World War.

In the short story by the Yugoslav writer Marko Vujačić entitled 'I Have Died Every Kind of Death', the heroine, a young Serbian girl, is a victim of interrogation by Gestapo agents, who try to force from her closed lips the names of her dissident companions. But in vain: tortured and flung down on the concrete floor of her prison cell, she remembers her beloved comrade, Iver, and thinks she hears his voice softly singing Botev's song about freedom and immortality:

Both earth and heaven, wild beast and nature,
And of him minstrels sing their songs.

From the depths of her subconscious mind she heard these lines, which unlocked new reserves of strength in her. And she did not speak.

The Serbian man of letters Vëlibor Gligorić describes his 'encounter' with Khristo Botev in the darkest hours of his life:

. . . I realized how powerful his song was, under the fascist occupation, when I was held in the concentration camp of Banica. In that heavy and despairing atmosphere of death, I found myself next to a Bulgarian, an old political émigré broken by the sufferings of exile, who hummed songs to me—and their words were by Khristo Botev. Those robust words, the stirring appeal that thrust itself forward into the future beyond death, the resolute sacrifice for freedom—all strengthened, sustained and restored my spirits. The poems of Khristo Botev broke through the sepulchral atmosphere, bringing us the wind off the mountain, the voice of the common people, a powerful harbinger of the struggle against terror, violence and subjection.

Freedom fighters everywhere knew the name of Khristo Botev and knew his poems, whose force is undiminished by time.

Khristo Botev was the name adopted in Slovakia by a group of guerrillas, Bulgarian students who were resisting Hitler's occupying forces, and the same name was adopted in Yugoslavia by a battalion of Bulgarian soldiers who became guerrilla fighters under the command of Lieutenant Dicho Petrov. Many other groups and detachments of partisans of the Bulgarian anti-fascist resistance, inspired by the words and deeds of Khristo Botev, also adopted his name and fought for national freedom, fired by his enthusiasm. The clandestine newspapers of the resistance movement quoted Botev's lines on liberty and on the immortality of those who die for

freedom. Those condemned to death went to the scaffold or faced the firing squad shouting at their executioners: 'He's alive, he's alive!' The guerrillas launched their attack, borne up by the rhythm of those same words, and they buried their fallen companions singing: 'He does not die who falls in battle: Fighting for freedom.' And the dead remained immortal among the living. The day that Botev joined the ranks of the immortals, 2 June, was chosen in Bulgaria as the day when the entire nation would commemorate those who had perished in the cause of freedom.

After the war a surprising phenomenon occurred. As a weapon of the resistance movement, the poetry of Botev continued to gain ground with renewed vigour. It truly survived the century. Partially known in five or six European languages before the war, it is now translated into thirty-eight languages and there have been fifty-seven editions of his complete poetical works covering all the continents. Every year the number of translations increases. Peoples are wiping out the traces of national servitude, the colonial system is breaking down and meanwhile the poetry of Khristo Botev burns in the hearts of all who are fighting for their liberation.

In 1973 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), whose constitution enshrines the principles of national freedom and anti-colonialism, placed the name of Khristo Botev in its calendar of anniversaries of great personalities and important historical events, and the year 1976 marked the centenary of his death. Without the name of Botev, there would be something missing from European history.

The poetry of Botev sprang up in the most crucial moments of a stormy era, when freedom was threatened and had to be defended, and when man had to fight in order to make it endure and prevail. Elsa Triolet, in her

preface to the *Poèmes de Christo Botev* translated into French by Paul Éluard, gives perhaps the clearest account of why this was:

Poetry is the art of the precursor who links the present to the future, and the poet-precursor tows behind him the heavy barge of time. I am speaking here of poetry, and not of that which glitters but is not gold; I am speaking of poets and not the victims of their imagination. I mean Pushkin, Byron, Victor Hugo, Khristo Botev, Mayakovsky, Kovačić, Nazim Hikmet, Neruda, all of whom were punished with exile, imprisonment or violent death, because they were ahead of their time and wanted to put the clock of history forward. The biographies of these poets have all the makings of legend; their lives are tales for the long winter evenings . . . these giant poets with their tremendous voices are comparable to radio, which reaches out to millions of people in the privacy of their homes, to whisper its secrets in the ear of each listener.

Khristo Botev lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A bare ten years separate his eighteenth year, when his first poem was published, and his twenty-eighth, when in the heart of the Balkans a bullet laid him low: a short chapter of his life, but studded with verses acknowledged to be a model of universal poetry, and with fiery articles published in five revolutionary newspapers. A decade culminating in his death, which made him a popular legend; those ten years, through which he burned with the 'dreadful force' of a comet, rank him indisputably with those European thinkers that belong most to the future, because they have been so much a part of their time.

Khristo Botev lived and wrote passionately. He was a poet, orator and militant who unhesitatingly gave his life for freedom; only one of these characteristics would have been enough to engrave his name for ever with those Europeans of genius who 'put the clock of history forward'.

A GENIUS BORN OF FIVE CENTURIES

BOTEV is the son of a people who were in bondage for 500 years, but who resisted assimilation and won back their freedom. Five centuries of Ottoman oppression had turned the songs of this people—a people to whom singing comes as naturally as breathing—into groans: their voice had shrunk to a whisper, and their aspiration to freedom had been twisted into suffering. For five centuries there had built up, like lava beneath the crater of a sleeping volcano, the pressure of all the music, words and popular upsurges that had been repressed. Botev was that seething crater: in him there exploded half a millennium of stifled songs and choked appeals.

The town where Khristo Botev was born is called Kalofer, popularly known at the time as 'the Golden'. The surrounding hills look down into a beautiful valley filled with rose bushes. In his novel *Varenka Olesova*, Maxim Gorky was later to say through Colonel Vassily Olesov: 'You call that a beautiful landscape? Huh! You don't know what beauty means. If you want to see something beautiful, go to the Valley of Roses.' But, amid such splendour people lived under the yoke, 'without freedom, without charity, without pity, without

compassion . . .', poor 'devils', in chains because they could not pay the heavy taxes or carry out the toil ordered by the big landowners and mitred feudal lords. 'Kalofer, the Golden', Botev was to say, 'nurtured in me a passionate affection, which soon vanished, and a deep hatred that will go with me to the grave.'

That contrast of love and hatred—natural splendour and human suffering—made an indelible impression on the boy's mind. With social strife, the contradictions grew more acute. It was not the Turks who carried on production and trade in the Ottoman Empire. The craftsmen, farmers and market gardeners were Bulgarians. It was they who bred the silkworms and grew the marvellous oil-bearing rose, renowned for its scent then as it is today; it was they who traded with the West. They worked and produced, but remained bereft of social and political rights. The contrast was tragic. The young Botev observed and absorbed the mingled beauty and horror. As a youth, he was to write: 'O sorrow with no hope . . . '—a line in which the syllables fall like tears.

His mother's voice alone gave the boy a glimmer of hope. Heiress to the Bulgarian bards, she knew hundreds of folk-songs in which the dream of freedom was interwoven with deep suffering. They told of slavery, but also of defenders of the enslaved land, generous spirits, brave men in love with life. For the first time, the boy glimpsed freedom through the magic casements of song.

The image of the hero, a child's dream, was to become his lifelong ideal. He liked noisy games in which might and right were victorious. But games were often rudely interrupted by the clank of the 'dragging chains' along the Valley of Roses, 'heavy chains' always, dragged by exhausted men—a sound that pervades his work, echoing in his poems like a cry of protest. The whips flicker across the backs of those in chains:

‘And snakes have drained life from the poor . . .’ he wrote later; the original beats with a throbbing alliteration suggestive of ebbing life-blood.

His father Botyo Petkov, a schoolteacher known as the most advanced Bulgarian teacher of his time, had studied at the Odessa seminary. At his father’s school the young Botev took his first steps along the path to knowledge, and in particular learned Russian and French—an achievement that enabled him to break through the wall that oppression had built around his mother tongue.

His father did not fail to notice the youth’s sensitiveness, and strove to deflect his gaze from the sight of suffering. Under the Ottoman Empire the intelligentsia of the subject people were allowed a degree of freedom in cultural matters. Botev’s father wished to send his son abroad to train as a teacher; he wrote to a friend: ‘I am waiting for the day when I shall be able to send Khristo to Odessa.’

In October 1863 the young Botev, aged 15, at last departed for that city on the shores of the Black Sea. There he found a colony of Bulgarians from Kalofer, who helped him to obtain a Russian State scholarship. He wanted to enter the Lycée Richelieu, famous for the calibre of its Russian and French teachers, but only the sons of great landowners and aristocrats were admitted. Thus, after the Ottoman subjugation, Botev came up against tsarist Russia. His disappointment would never fade during the time he spent at the second—and second-rate—Odessa Lycée. He came into conflict with the school rules and the social climate of that establishment. There, a handful of peasants’ sons and foreign pupils found themselves surrounded by the privileged sons of nobles and high officials, wealthy citizens and pillars of the church, and were cold-shouldered by them.

But the boy wanted to learn, driven on by the

unquenchable zeal of the oppressed seeking liberation through study. Shugorov, his Russian teacher at the Odessa Lycée, fostered his love of poetry. In the literary circle that he led, Botev devoured the works of Pushkin, Lermontov and Shevchenko. He avidly perused the most influential periodicals of his day—*Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) and *Otechestvennye zapiski* (Notes on the Fatherland)—and read the works of revolutionary democrats, Pisarev, Chernyshevsk, Dobrolyubov and Herzen, the young Russians' favourite writers. Through them, he discovered foreign writers, the Encyclopaedists and the French materialists, the Utopian visions of Fourier, the works of Victor Hugo and the philosophical treatises of Feuerbach.

At school he continued to study French but also turned to Latin writers. 'He read until he could read no more', some of his schoolfellows were to say of him later; he declaimed 'with all his heart and soul' verses by Nekrasov, Lermontov and Pushkin, captivated by the boldness of their thought, the lyricism of their poems and the breeze of freedom that bore them along. He translated Bulgarian folk-songs into Russian, encouraged by his teacher Grigorovich. And it was in Odessa that the schoolboy Botev wrote his first poem, 'To My Mother'.

In 1863 and 1864 movements of democratic origin—called 'disturbances' in the official records—occurred in the Russian schools; they were prompted by the political developments to be observed in Russia, and were also influenced by the Polish national rising. The Polish teachers in Odessa, who were the pupils' favourites, were dismissed. Aspirations to freedom and national problems intertwined. Carried away by the excitement of the day, Botev soon had to leave the Odessa Lycée when his scholarship was withdrawn at the prompting of the leaders of the town's Bulgarian colony, who were incensed

by his libertarian ideas. The young poet found himself alone in Odessa, where he was to spend thirteen months with no means of support save a few private lessons given to a Polish family that spoke enthusiastically of the popular uprising of 1865. He understood how 'strong and wicked are those who possess wealth, power and authority'; and to the end of his days that conclusion remained the cornerstone of his social creed.

Alone in Odessa, he turned instinctively to progressive circles and drew close in spirit to the Polish and Russian revolutionaries. He continued to read the works of the Russian revolutionary democrats; he discovered Byron, Heine and Chateaubriand. Life and books were two parallel and mutually complementary schools for Botev. He rubbed shoulders with the destitute; he spent long nights among the dregs of Odessa's population, sheltering under the Dnieper bridge, listening to their conversations on fate and human nature. Thus, by mixing with philosopher-tramps, he learned sociology.

In Odessa—the dream refuge of every Bulgarian enduring Ottoman domination—the young Botev was to realize, as he later wrote, that 'where there are no Turks, the rich themselves are the oppressors'. He had discovered another basic truth. The town of Kalofer had shown him the suffering of his people; the intellectual city of Odessa enabled him to discover the ideological side of social reality. These two approaches to knowledge of life combined to convert the youth to the ideals of freedom that had imbued the European air since the French Revolution, after the uprisings of the St Petersburg Decembrists, the Russian agrarian reform and the Polish rising. Thus Botev entered, to use his own words, 'the school of life'.

This metamorphosis, from an instinctive adversary of national oppression to a self-aware militant fighting for

the political freedom of the Bulgarian people and of the individual, was not completed during the time he spent in Odessa; but there it all began, in a setting where the cross-fertilization of Russian social thinking and the progressive ideas of the West produced the ideal of 'compassion for the suffering of all mankind . . . of all brothers who live in their own countries bereft of freedom'.

In 1866 the poet left Odessa to take up a teaching post in the village of Zadunaevka, populated by Bulgarian emigrants from the Sliven area. Living among them, the resolve grew on him to dedicate himself to the cause of freedom. When his father, who was now an old man, recalled him to Bulgaria, he set off for his homeland without hesitation, to join the struggle.

Changed in mind as well as in body, the young man returned to his native town. 'His fine bearing and ardent nature compelled enthusiasm. Botev was unusually handsome. At that age—18—he had the pale complexion of a girl and wore neither beard nor moustache. He was tall, strong and alert, and his long hair framed his face.' By the spring of 1867 he was back in Kalofer as a teacher. Communicative by nature, he sought the company of his fellows: 'He foregathered with humble people in the taverns and preached progressive ideas and patriotism to them.' He brought together young people of his own age and pupils in the higher grades, and prepared them for the struggle for freedom. His words were fiery and convincing, his tone resolute and incisive; he did not take kindly to contradiction; he 'attacked everything and blamed everybody'; and he rejected the old ways, silent submissiveness and resignation.

Botev was living at Kalofer when the newspaper *Gai̇da* (Bagpipes), produced by the emigrants, published his poem 'To My Mother', which gave expression to his weariness and his longing for maternal consolation:

But one desire, one only remains:
 To fall into your sweet embrace, to feel alive,
 So that my embittered youth, my anguished soul
 May tell you, dear heart, of its cares . . .

Everything began on the day sacred to the memory of that forerunner of the Renaissance who, as early as the ninth century and first in all Europe, took up the cudgels against dogmatism: Constantine the philosopher, called St Cyril, who with his brother Methodius devised the Cyrillic alphabet. In the darkness of the Middle Ages, Cyril proclaimed the right of peoples to write in their mother tongue, and thus set them on the road to liberation.

On 11 May 1867, therefore, Kalofer commemorated the two brothers according to tradition. When he heard the official speeches, Botev rebelled; he could not countenance reducing the revolutionary work of Cyril to the mere invention of an alphabet, even if the latter had opened the door to education for the Slavs and the Bulgarian people. For in order to be free, it was not enough to be educated. The message of Cyril's work was quite different: it called for political and national freedom. Scarcely were the speeches over when the young man stood up. What did this impromptu speaker say? Nobody recorded his words, but in view of the fear which the local 'quislings' felt at that moment, history allows us a guess. At that moment, all those who lived by the grace and favour of the foreign oppressor must have looked anxiously over their shoulders, afraid that the men of the Turkish guard would intervene!

Seven years later, again on the feast of Cyril and Methodius, Khristo Botev was to write in his newspaper *Zname* (The Flag): 'The genius of the Bulgarian people has generated so many major events that we may feel justly

proud of having written, in the past, a few pages in the history of the progress of mankind.' This must surely have been the first theme expounded by the young speaker to his dumbfounded audience. But Botev did not confine himself to this historical observation, which to him was only a reference to the past. The action of Cyril and Methodius in taking a stand against all the clergy in Europe was a call to resist everything that might impede the people's progress here and now. And in the same article he wrote: 'They are the men of genius who have written a great event into our stormy history, representatives of the brotherly union of the Slavs, free and equal in rights . . .' 'The eleventh of May will soon be the Feast-day of our national revolution and of our freedom.'

Young Botev's speech alarmed the cowardly but disturbed others and moved them to action: the 'undesirable' was soon forced to leave his native town, this time permanently. He crossed the Danube once again and returned to Romania. He was in exile. But the exile took one firm belief with him: the Bulgarian people were ripe for freedom and independence.

The conclusion had already been expressed by European men of letters and journalists. Lamartine had made it public in the 1840s. In 1832, stricken by pleurisy on his way back from the Middle East, the French poet had spent several weeks in the Bulgarian towns of Plovdiv, Vetren and Pazardzhik; on returning to France he noted in his *Voyage en Orient*: 'The Bulgarians are ripe for freedom and independence.' Shortly afterwards he shouted in the Chamber of Deputies in Paris: 'We have the inspired maxim of a great French moralist, who rightly said that great thoughts come from the heart . . . we can justifiably paraphrase this and say that, in politics, great thoughts come from the people.' He repeated on the same occasion: 'The Bulgarians are ripe for freedom.'

Lamartine had rightly understood the setting in which Khristo Botev was soon to make his appearance. With the characteristic clairvoyance of the poet, he sensed the imminent upheaval that was to shake the Balkans. What kind of upheaval? A mere revamping of frontiers on the old map of Eastern Europe? Intuitively he had heard in the distant rumblings, the thunderclap that was to rouse the new Balkan peoples. Through the 'infinite kindness' that his hosts at Plovdiv and Vetren had lavished upon him, Lamartine had sensed the surge of the Bulgarians and the other enslaved peoples towards freedom. In a letter to the Count of Virieux he reached the following conclusion: 'The *Marseillaise* continues to warm the hearts of these oppressed peoples, and with their revolution the hour will strike for the new progressive forces to rise up at the sound of the *Marseillaise* and assail the old order.' Thus wrote the French poet after his stay in Bulgaria. The spirit of freedom extolled by the volunteers of the Rhine Army was setting Bulgarian hearts aflame 'while in France', as Lamartine remarked, 'its charm was fading'. The liberating verses that had given the fighters for the Revolution their faith in the future of peoples were soon to fire the heart of Botev.

POETRY TAKES HOLD

IN 1867 Khristo Botev was an exile in Romania. Here his concern with his own personal life comes to an end, giving place to three passions—poetry, journalism and action—that would henceforth beat out the rhythms of his life.

The emigrants welcomed the young poet whose unquiet and questing spirit so closely matched their own. His early poetry moved them. In contact with them, the youth's airs in a minor key became rough harmonies, verses in which 'beloved freedom' was rhymed with 'my countrymen', and 'the noise of a country's battle' with 'the victory of the world's people'.

In the poem 'To My Brother', written that same year of 1867, his personal lament joins with that of the people in protest against those who remain deaf to their cries:

Gloomy dreams and thoughts distressing
Ever my young soul torment;
Ah, who'll touch with hand caressing
This poor heart by anguish rent?

No one, no one! Freedom, pleasure,
Both remain for it unknown,
While it pulses without measure
In answer to the people's moan.

The exile learned the printer's trade. He began his new career on the staff of the Bulgarian emigrants' newspaper *Dunavska zora* (Dawn over the Danube), which published his poem 'To My Brother'. He subsequently worked on the newspaper *T''pan* (Drum). In the columns of *Dunavska zora* he announced to his readers that he would shortly publish his 'first attempts at poetry'. The passion for poetry and the passion for revolutionary action took hold of him; it was his destiny to be divided between writing and fighting, the pen preparing him for battle, and battle sharpening his pen.

In 1868, when a group of insurgents were preparing to cross the Danube and take up arms to fight for national freedom, Khristo Botev volunteered and was appointed their chronicler. Beyond the river, at arm's length, was his homeland! He addressed his mother, his beloved and his brothers in an elegy entitled 'On Parting', which is both a confession and a testament.

The exiles were too poor to equip the rebels properly, and they asked in vain for weapons. At gatherings of emigrants, in the din of Bucharest taverns, voices were raised in protest against the 'false patriots of Odessa', rich Bulgarians with whom Botev had already clashed, and against the 'heartless philosophers of Belgrade' and 'speculators of Bucharest—so generous in words' who failed to provide the financial support pledged to those preparing to fight. At the request of the Ottoman authorities, the Romanian police arrested the leader and some of his friends. The group disbanded and Botev remained on the foreign shore. But history has preserved his lyrical testaments, an outpouring of the heart and a cry of revolt:

Do not weep, Mother, nor sorrow
That I have become a haiduk,
A haiduk, Mother, a brigand,

Leaving you lone and unhappy
 Mourning the first of your children.
 But what would you have me do now?
 Since you have borne me, Mother,
 With a strong heart of a hero?
 Perhaps I shall die in my youth
 But enough for me is this guerdon
 That people may say of me one day
 'He died, poor fellow, for Justice,
 For the cause of Justice and Freedom'.

Botev expected neither praise nor gratitude, for he had given himself to the people and to the cause of freedom. He remained on the shore, but the deed had been merely postponed. The road leading to it was 'dreadful but glorious . . .'. He had made his choice. 'On Parting' would soon become a song, to be hummed and passed on by ear until it passed into folklore.

Botev tried to study medicine at the University of Bucharest; a doctor might be of use in the patriots' ranks and constantly in his mind he could hear the call: 'To arms and to the mountains!'. But his poverty forced the exile to give up his university studies and he joined a troupe of players. There he discovered Schiller and was greatly taken with the character Karl Moor, the hero of the play *Die Räuber* (The Bandits), which is a blast against all tyrannies. He was spellbound and constantly recited Moor's lines:

My spirit thirsts for derring-do
 My breath for freedom . . .

But Schiller's hero ultimately withdraws into his memories, a deluding image of the abstract rebel who allows himself to be carried away by sonorous slogans and a nameless adversary. Botev, for his part, was looking for

a very real enemy in order to attack him head-on and overthrow him, not on the stage, but in real life.

In the spring of 1869, Botev's wanderings led him to Alexandria, a town some 100 kilometres from Bucharest, where he became a teacher, and then to Ismail, a Romanian port on the Danube from which, once more, he could gaze on his native land. In that town he was to come into contact with progressive Russian and Romanian elements. He debated. He read. Wherever he went, libraries drew him irresistibly. As in Odessa, he read 'until he could read no more' the literature sent from London to Russia by clandestine channels that passed through Romania. Botev himself helped to forward Herzen's newspaper *Kolokol* (The Bell).

Herzen, a Russian *émigré* had settled in the British capital where he was developing the theory and ideas of the revolutionary democracy of the day. His paper explored the prospects of liberation. But what were they? The poet Botev was always concerned with that problem. He was resistant to set ideas, and thought for himself. What was freedom? Freedom for whom? National freedom? Liberation from foreign domination? But was not freedom in social relationships still an open question? He had already crossed swords on the matter with the Bulgarian 'quislings'—people of wealth in his native town, in Odessa and in Romania—and with Russian landowners and aristocrats. They, too, hoped for liberation—from the Turks or from the despotism of the Tsars. But was that where true freedom lay?

Bulgaria had just triumphed in its struggle for the independence of its Church, a struggle waged for long decades by the country's educated élite, under the standard of Cyril and Methodius, for the use of the mother tongue in churches and schools. Once the existence of the Bulgarian nation was recognized *de iure* in the Ottoman

Empire, there was another step to be taken, from the right 'to be' to the right 'to become'—the final step to national freedom. This was a crucial move, even greater in scope than Cyril's achievement, and called for a further exploit.

By a paradox of history, scarcely had the Church won its independence than it turned on the people, opposing national liberation. As Botev observed, that newly won independence 'sank a hook in the people's tongue to prevent them from crying: "Freedom"'. With a sarcasm worthy of Victor Hugo, Botev wrote: 'O humble cassock! What crimes and baseness hide beneath thy ample folds!'. It was his love of freedom that made him an atheist. Like Victor Hugo, who saw the priest as the antithesis of progress, Botev fired broadsides that were to pass into the language of Bulgarian politics as powerful weapons against the spirit of servility. The cry 'To arms!', uttered in the name of freedom, drowned out the clamour of the church bells; the glint of steel outshone the glitter of the gold crucifix.

In an 'Elegy', written in 1870, Botev's stanzas are polemic in tone, heavy with contempt for the patience of a people lulled to sleep in a 'servile cradle' by the specious pledge that their 'soul is saved'.

Oh, tell me, tell me, people mine,
 Who rocks your servile cradle now?
 When Jesus on the cross did pine
 Was it he his ribs who stabbed?
 Or he, who sang through ages slow:
 'Be patient and your soul is saved!'
 Was it himself, was it his proxy?
 Loyola's son or Judas' kin?

. . .
 Who? Tell!—No answer anywhere!
 . . .

But with a scowl the people point
Towards a choice and bestial rank

. . .
The people point . . . and blood-drops, shed
From sweating brows o'er tomb-stones, flood . . .

The poet's pen compounds the metaphors in a strong and
supple amalgam:

The cross is driven into the living body,
Rust corrodes the well-gnawed bones,
And snakes have drained life from the poor . . .

The images thicken, the statement speeds up into a
mighty whirlwind that stirs mind, nerves and imagination,
and makes the whole being rise up against indifference.

Still in 1870—which seems to have been a year of
particularly strong lyrical inspiration—the poet wrote
'Sharing', a moving appeal to his senior Lyuben Karavelov
who, on the threshold of the struggle for national freedom,
was hesitating between the serene pen of the dedicated
teacher and the brandished sword of the fighter:

Posterity will be our judge,
So hand in hand now together
And forward with a firmer tread!

. . .
Forward, now, with feelings and thoughts
To share for the last time . . .

From this point on, the minor key disappears from Botev's
poetry. His verse becomes muscular, a poetic war-drum
sounds the charge:

To keep our sacred word
To death, brother, to death to go!

And yet the poet does his utmost to voice his profession
of faith, love and life.

LOVE AND THE POET

BOTEV does not place love in opposition to the struggle for freedom: he unites the two. For him freedom does not exist by itself—it is not an abstraction, a thing apart from life, austere and disembodied. The freedom for which he will fight to his last breath is necessary to the triumph of the living man along with everything that is human—love included. He is down-to-earth—not to say earthy! Everything human is precious to him, stirs him and sets in his hand the sword of battle. The fiery Khristo Botev fights passionately, aspires ardently to love, adores nature, listens to the dawn song of the nightingales and raises his own voice in song:

The nightingale bursts into song;
With joy be greeted the dawn;
Through the window a face
Showed itself and smiled.

For Botev, there is no contradiction between the struggle for liberation and attachment to the beloved; the revolutionary is not a solitary who aspires only to sacrifice, encountering on his deserted way and accompanied by

none but ascetics and rebellious knights like himself, renouncing love and the things of the flesh. His ideal is freedom for the people and for the individual. His nearest and dearest—mother, fiancée, brothers and sisters—are not pushed to one side. The society he fights for is made up of human beings whom he cherishes passionately, to the point of laying down his life for them. His country, his people, the individual, freedom and mankind are not fictions but living realities.

In one of his articles he wrote: 'He who does not love his father and mother, his brothers and sisters, does not love his country either.' A downright statement indeed! Freedom is a human condition, not an abstract category. In the battle that he is fighting, moreover, Botev strives to carry with him all his family and friends, whom he fires with his heroic enthusiasm, selflessness and faith in the triumph of life:

Ah, mother—heroic mother!
 Forgive me, and now farewell!
 I have already shouldered my rifle
 And run at the people's call
 Against our infidel enemy
 There for what's sweet, for what's dear,
 For you, for my father, my brothers,
 . . .

Perhaps there he will meet his death?

But when you hear, my mother,
 Bullets sing over the village,
 Hurrying feet of the comrades,
 . . .
 If they should tell you that I
 Have fallen, pierced by a bullet,
 Even then, mother, do not weep . . .

But if victory is won, all will joyfully celebrate their triumph:

If I come, dear little mother,
Safe and sound back to the village
In my hands bearing the standard
.
.
.
Ah, then, heroic mother,
Then, precious sweetheart beloved,
Gather some flowers from the garden . . .

Botev does not take up arms 'for pleasure': only adventurers and poseurs adopt the unrealistic attitude of 'fighting for fighting's sake'. In his eyes, social commitment is a necessity imposed by the historical fact that a rift has opened between society and the creative individual. In this anti-national and anti-human context, the individual, beauty and love are all enslaved. Botev's struggle, with the pen as well as with the gun, is thus clearly defined: driven by 'the perennial love of freedom', he is indeed fighting for the people, but without sacrificing his personal life. He is neither a closet revolutionary, nor an ascetic, but truly a man of flesh and blood. If he accepts 'voluntary destitution', the heavy burden of the emigrant, it is not for the sake of any abstract theory but because there is materially no other way open to him to carry on his struggle. The life of an exile was thrust upon him; he did not choose it.

Botev lived among his fellow men, like the rest, in poverty, but did not disdain a degree of elegance 'when he could afford it', his contemporaries said. It pained him sometimes to have to go out in 'a torn coat' or 'in rags'. He was in love with beauty as much as with justice. Hence he was sounder, stronger and more reasonable—because he was more natural—than all the romantic revolutionaries; and more enthusiastic too, because he was moved by

genuinely human feelings. The romantic tells his beloved: 'I must suppress my love; my attachment to you would fetter me; I must not love'; this is an attitude of weakness, not strength. Botev, on the contrary, does nothing to check the impulse to draw close to his beloved, to his 'sweet darling', to 'two arched eyebrows'; the image of the adored dwells in him, but does not for one moment turn him from his ideal; and the love he pledges to those 'dark eyes' cannot distract him from his fight or muddle the notes of his rebellious lyre.

Like a steady accompaniment of close chords, through Botev's poems run inseparable the name of his mother and the name of his beloved. Both are present in sorrow as in joys, in laments or in ecstasy.

Ah, then, heroic mother,
Then, precious sweetheart beloved . . .

Both alike nourish his vitality and kindle his fighting spirit.

Love always has its place in Botev's poetry, as it had at the core of his personality. The image of his fiancée, crayoned in pastel shades, living and tender, stands out against the tormented background of a country enslaved.

There where my pretty sweetheart
Raised her dark eyes to greet me
And with that smile so gentle
Sounded the depths of my sad heart.

The exiled poet feels for the suffering of his loved one, left behind in the captive country. He trembles to think of the grief she would feel if, visiting his mother, she should learn that he was dead:

Deeply there will sigh for me
Two hearts I hold dear—
Hers, mother, and yours!
And two tears will fall
On the old breast and the young . . .

Love, then, plays for the revolutionary poet a constant part. This is no game of knight and lady, or mutual abasement, or abdication of human dignity, or crude enslavement to instinct; the poet has long since 'trampled underfoot' any love of that kind. Love is no closed double circle within which, for 'a smile . . . feelings are flouted'. On the contrary, the beloved herself will join in the action; far from renouncing human love for the love of freedom, he persuades her to take part in his fight. In his view, love and freedom go hand in hand; he urges the woman he loves to march at his side and sing of freedom in unison with him:

Sing me yourself such a song,
Sing to me, maiden, of grief
. . .
My heart is trembling—it will fly,
It will fly, sweetheart, awake!
There, where the earth resounds and rumbles
. . .
There . . . there storms break down the branches,
And sabres bind them in a wreath . . .

To rebel does not mean to reject love, but to enlist it in the struggle; rebellion does not supplant love, but brings it to completeness.

Almost at the same time as his poem 'To My First Love', Botev wrote 'Eloped' in which the integration of love in the struggle for freedom reaches its culmination. The beloved is reunited with the hero, who has come out of the maquis to take her away with him.

For the banner floated there
'Mid a crowd of heroes brave
While Stoyana, white and fair,
Snuggled in Doichin's embrace.

She lays her head on the fighter's chest and lets herself be carried off. Her old father, whom life and battle have made wise, blesses their love:

Keep, O forest, these my children;
While the sun shines in the heavens,
While the bird does sing in thee,
So long may this banner wave!

The love that unites the woman and the man in their fight for freedom is thus consecrated. Botev places his own interpretation on the problem of love. The man and the woman are in love, not when they gaze into each other's eyes, expressing their communion through smiles, caresses and sexual ecstasy, but when they fix their gaze together on the same goal. Their attachment is not just a matter of emotion and biology; it is also the union of two minds and two wills.

Botev founded a family. During the most feverish period of insurrectionary activity in his life, he contracted a civil marriage with Veneta Vezireva, the girl he loved. They had a daughter, and in accordance with popular tradition he named her after his mother, who had joined him in Bucharest with his younger brother. After the death of the poet's father, his other two brothers took the road to exile in their turn and they too settled in Romania. Botev kept them all on the meagre income he earned from journalism and from translations. But the daily grind and family cares would never quench the ardour of his rebel activity.

It is impossible to imagine Botev, his works or his personality without this constant striving towards his ideal. No other care or passion could turn him aside from it. Even when transported by human love, he remained first and foremost a patriot; and when he set out for the supreme struggle, he was to write to the woman he loved,

the mother of his daughter: 'God will preserve me, if I survive we shall be the happiest people in this world.' The supreme revolutionary values are close alongside the values of everyday; sometimes they merge with them, derive from them or inspire them; but they never reject them. Everything holds together, as it does in life, without aloofness or contradiction.

THE POET AND THE ROUSING WORD

IN 1964 the octogenarian Pablo Picasso wrote:

What do you think an artist is? A dolt who has only eyes if he is a painter, only ears if he is a musician, or a lyre at every level of the heart if he is a poet? . . . On the contrary, he is at the same time a political being, constantly alert to the harrowing, burning or pleasant events taking place in the world, and moulding himself wholly in their image. How could he possibly turn his back on his fellows? What ivory-tower unconcern would allow him to draw aside from the life they bring in such abundance? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments . . . art is an offensive and defensive weapon of war against the enemy.

In the nineteenth century Botev was the prototype of the artist committed to society, with his feelings and his fears. 'Science, literature, poetry and journalism alike', he wrote, 'should bear the stamp of political propaganda . . . and let there be no more art for art's sake.' Such words are surely not those of a poet who has nothing but 'a lyre at every level of the heart'. Botev affirms the need for thinkers and writers to take an active part in the life of the people:

Grace and honour to the honest souls who, at this crucial time, rightly rebel against their condition. I can state

categorically that a rousing word today is far more important than whole volumes of diplomatic and philosophical writings would be later.

He is in favour of striking while the iron is hot, and striking with words that mirror the time.

Such were the thoughts of the 22-year-old teacher when in 1871 he left the teaching profession and, while continuing to write poems, began bringing out newspapers, the first of which was baldly entitled *The Word of the Bulgarian Emigrants*. The conclusion from his earlier musings became the maxim of the committed journalist: 'Journalism is one of the first weapons of social struggle.' Every penny earned would henceforth go towards the publication of a 'paper'. He wrote and typeset *The Word* himself, letter by letter; worked on *Freedom and Independence*, organs of the Bulgarian emigrant community; wrote *The Flag* unaided (and brought it up to the standard of Herzen's London paper *Kolokol* (The Bell)); and finally launched *Nova B'lgaria* (New Bulgaria), whose first issue called on the people for a general insurrection, and whose every line resounds like a shout and a watchword.

Every line printed in these newspapers bore the stamp of a man inspired, attesting to a vision that penetrated the future, scrutinized historical development and related the present to the future. The reporting was imbued with feeling and studded with images that made a political article into a literary pamphlet. Botev the artist built his poetry on lucid thinking; every poetic image contained an idea, and every key thought was expressed in a compelling image that outlined its essentials and imprinted them on the reader's mind with the sharpness of a design in relief. His style as a journalist was thus as accessible to ignorant readers as to the educated, and even to listeners who could not read.

The Word first came out on 10 June 1871, in what Victor Hugo was to call a 'terrible year' for Europe. The paper established both the poet and the popular orator. Two key maxims served as its epigraph: 'Truth is sacred. Freedom is dear to us.' In the first issue Botev wrote, in a style bristling with antitheses and aphorisms: 'Just as an eye is needed in order to perceive light, an ear to perceive sound and reason to perceive the simplest truth, so science, education and development are essential to any people in order to attain a degree of well-being. But all this depends on a prerequisite that we lack—freedom.' Freedom! This was the political theme of *The Word* and of all Botev's journalistic activity.

From *The Word* to *The Flag* Botev's ideological positions and political intuition evolved, while his writing steadily gained in vigour. Political wisdom and poetic magic vie for first place in our admiration, for the journalist and the artist wrote with equal talent.

Botev left us three volumes of journalism, feature articles and epistolary prose. Political theses are expounded with the logic of a scholar and illuminated by a host of facts and parallels drawn from history or economics. But to make his argument more striking and cogent, the author summons to his aid the emotion proper to poetry, its passion and its plasticity. In the article in *The Word* that inaugurated his career as a journalist and charted the political programme of the revolutionary emigrants, Botev concluded on a lyrical note and did not hesitate to quote the final verses of the poem 'To my Brother'.

The poem 'On Parting' found a powerful echo in the 'scenes from a journey' that Khristo Botev entitled 'Example of Ottoman Justice'. As a pendant to the poem in which he described his dear ones as 'wearing black in mourning for me . . .', Botev, with supreme journalistic skill, painted the sombre picture of bondage:

It was the village of Kalofer. Sad memories crowded into my mind as soon as I came over the brow of the hill and saw the pretty houses and the churches, through which the crystal-clear river Tundzha meandered like a serpent. Here, I said to myself, is my beloved, here are the comrades with whom I have spent the brightest days of my life . . .

But as soon as I reached the inn a horrible sight met my eyes: women, children and girls were wailing, men hurried about with a distraught look . . . mother was parted from son, wife from husband, sister from brother and small children from their dear father; cruel partings indeed! And the clanking of chains punctuated the groans of the crowd . . .

But who were all these wretched people, chained like savage beasts? To catch one look, one word from them was enough: they were my comrades, our brothers! Defenders of the people! So painful it was to meet their eyes . . . and tears coursed down my cheeks . . .

Unhappy people! A curse on every tyrant, the Lord's Anointed! . . .

This description evokes the episode in 'Reisebilder', (Scenes from a Journey) by Heinrich Heine, in which the German poet and publicist meets a group of peasants meekly leaving Germany. Two scenes—one by Heine and the other by Botev; two historical documents, and two pens writing as one.

In his pamphlet-article 'Petrushan', published in *The Word*, appeared the original idea for Botev's future poem 'He's Alive, He's Alive!' Here it was expressed in this laconic thought: 'They all died, but they are still alive in our hearts.' The article 'Has the Church Question Been Settled?' was a journalistic sequel to the poem 'An Elegy':

. . . But while these Asiatic diplomacies continued, while the endless comedy of the church question was being acted out, another play set foot on the stage of the Balkan Theatre, something else drew away the attention of the nation—the

political question appeared. The tragic act shook the opium-sodden brain of Turkey, her hair stood on end and to put a stop to the enthusiasm and the applause of the audience, to put off the terrible finale of the opera—after long hesitations she hurriedly brought forth the neat Ferman for the 'Bulgarian Exarchate'. But it was too late! It did not make that impression which it might have made ten or twelve years ago. The nation who, during this time had not remained with folded hands, but was learning and developing and therewith feeling new needs, saw that this was not what it wanted, not herein lay its future, its liberty . . . We saw and we can imagine it to ourselves: Kirdjali with Chrysostom's sermons, dulling seminaries, a luxurious young clergy, loudly spoken international lies, and all it has been able to give any clergy all over the world and ever since the epoch of Christianity.

The question has been settled only for the clergy, whereas for the people it will be decided only when it can support the absence of this clergy. But until then, how much time will pass? How many more victims will be necessary?¹

Botev the journalist was sure that, in his time, the press was indispensable not only to inform its readers, but also to exhort them and to show them the role played by freedom in human existence, the natural link uniting people in their striving towards progress. Freedom, he knew, was indivisible; therefore his vision as a journalist and a poet encompassed not only his native country but Europe and the whole world. Journalist and poet at one and the same time, with heart and mind always yoked together, he wrote of all events that had a bearing on freedom, man and civilization. For Botev, the struggle knew no geographical frontiers. Bosnia and Herzegovina; Janina in Greece; Spain and France; the Paris Commune

1. English text from *Khristo Botev: A Selection*, edited by George Tsanev, Sofia, The Khristo Botev Institute, 1948.

and its epic siege against the Prussian soldiery, the attitude of Thiers—nothing escaped the attention of Botev the journalist. Bismarck and Thiers were to be his targets in *The Word* in 1871, just as they were in the French press; *The Word* added its voice to those of Victor Hugo in *Rappel* (Recall) and Jules Vallès in *Cri du peuple*, and was in the vanguard of European journalism during that 'terrible year'. Botev's writing at that time attained a power and fullness that rivalled those of Victor Hugo, Arthur Rimbaud and Eugène Pottier.

Outraged at the Prussian occupation of France, which alarmed all Europe, and at the behaviour of the Versailles Government under Thiers, the 70-year-old Hugo exclaimed: 'Love becomes hatred in the presence of evil'; while three years earlier, the young Botev had already written, in his poem 'To My First Love':

Where everything with wounds is covered
And an evil heart enwrapped in spite!

Perfect concord of expression and harmony, stemming from one and the same passion. The same year, in his poem 'On Parting', Botev had already addressed his mother and entrusted her with this message for his young brothers:

They will become like their brother,
Strong in love and in hatred
. . .
Then when they meet the enemy,
They can greet him with bullets,
And with the sword caress him.

Love and hatred become weapons in the struggle for freedom. The same metamorphosis occurs in Hugo, where love turns into hatred in order to resist evil, and in Botev

where the sword replaces the caress and a greeting becomes a bullet.

Like a taut string vibrating over Europe, the poet Botev realistically echoes the events of Paris under siege. Hugo, repelled by the Terror, reviles it in June 1871:

The smiling killers, pleasure-seeking brutes,
Those behind whose carriage tags a tumbril,
Sometime dancers, cut-throats of today,
Who drink the people's blood laced with champagne,
Those who are elegant, yet savages.

And Botev, on 15 May 1871, wrote his lyrical pamphlet *Comic Tears*, in which weeping is mingled with irony and curses with hope:

Curse . . . for ruining your capital and dying with those words on their lips, robbers' words for you: freedom or death, bread or a bullet! spit upon their dead bodies . . . Hurl mud and stones upon the grave of Dombrowski, because he did not become the servant of a crowned head . . .¹

In his use of invective and the imperative, Botev resembles Arthur Rimbaud, particularly the Rimbaud of those days of tragedy for Europe when the French poet wrote his pamphlet *L'orgie parisienne*:

O hearts of filth, terrifying mouths . . .
Come! . . . Eat! . . . Drink! . . .
Hide the dark palaces in nests of planks . . .
O cowards . . . Be mad.²

1. English translation from *Khristo Botev: A Selection*, op. cit.

2. English translation by Wallace Fowlie, 1966: *Rimbaud: Complete Works and Selected Letters*, University of Chicago Press.

Botev:

Spit . . . Weep for the palaces . . . weep! No one can console madmen, no one can pacify the enraged!

Rimbaud:

Syphilitics, fools, kings, puppets, ventriloquists . . .¹

Botev, ironically:

Philanthropists . . .

Rimbaud:

What does Paris the whore care . . .?
Your souls and bodies, your poisons and your rags!
She will shake you off, you rotten scoffers!²

Botev:

Spit upon the dead bodies of those victims of civilization, whom you have embraced . . . and whom you today call whores, because they still had the strength to seize arms and save themselves from the whirlpool of debauchery! . . .³

Rimbaud (in 'Les mains de Jeanne-Marie'):

Jeanne-Marie has strong hands . . .
They have paled, marvellous
Under the great sun full of love,
On the bronze of machine-guns
Throughout insurgent Paris!
Ah! sometimes, O sacred hands,
At your wrists, hands where tremble our
Never sobered lips,
Cries out a chain of clear links!⁴

1. *Rimbaud: Complete Works* . . ., op. cit.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Khristo Botev: A Selection*, op. cit.

4. *Rimbaud: Complete Works* . . ., op. cit.

In April 1871 Botev borrowed the symbolic form and the title of the Apostles' Creed in a piece of writing that dazzles with its intelligence and verbal lustre. Inspired by the struggle and the principles of the citizens of Paris, he voiced, with a rare loftiness of thought, his faith in the future which would forge the unity of mankind.

'I believe in the united and common strength of the human race on earth to create good . . . And in the bright, life-giving spirit of reason, strengthening the hearts and souls of all people . . . in the united and indivisible fatherland of all peoples and the common ownership of all property . . .' He professes an order that will correct the faults of society; he awaits 'the awakening of the nations and the future communist order in the whole world'.¹

With Jules Vallès, the editor of the *Cri du peuple*, who prophesied 'Son of despair, you will be truly a free man', Botev, in his regular column in the newspaper *The Word*, alludes to the time that 'will make man more than a son of God and a citizen—not an ideal, but a real man'.

When the French poet Eugène Pottier proclaimed, in his poem on international brotherhood, that 'reason thunders in its crater', Botev was already feeling 'disdain for journalism that curses reason'.

In common with Victor Hugo, Arthur Rimbaud and Eugène Pottier, Botev looks beyond the horrors of the vengeance wreaked by the Prussians and by Versailles on the martyred city and perceives an invincible movement to raise it up and safeguard its future.

In 'La mère qui défend son petit' Victor Hugo proudly declaims:

Such is Paris. The city where Europe blends
With law, glory and art, a triple breast,
Suckles this heavenly child, the Future . . .

1. *Khristo Botev: A Selection*, op. cit.

And he says again, in *Un cri*:

And Paris is the abyss where the Future is hatching . . .
While Rimbaud expresses his hope, born in suffering:

O suffering city . . .
The worms, the pale worms
Will no more impede your breath of progress . . .¹

Botev echoes him, prophesying in the final passage of his *Comic Tears*:

And there shall come a day—the first . . .²

These great European minds think alike, moving to the same rhythm, resounding with the same rhymes and marching at the same pace in the same column. Khristo Botev walked shoulder to shoulder with Victor Hugo, Arthur Rimbaud and Eugène Pottier through that 'terrible year' for France and Europe: he was their herald and their anguished breath in the Balkans.

Between 11 May and 10 June of the same year, 1871, Botev wrote his poem 'The Struggle', which is part of the world's literary heritage. When Victor Hugo wrote:

This trembling embryo of the new human race
This giant, still a dwarf, we call 'Tomorrow' . . .

And when Eugène Pottier, using (in the original French) the same rhymes, launched his famous appeal: 'Let us join forces, and tomorrow The Internationale will be the human race', Botev concluded 'The Struggle' with these lines:

But in this realm of blood and sin,
This realm of knavery, vice and disgrace,

1. *Khristo Botev: A Selection*, op. cit.
2. Ibid.

This realm where sorrow and evil win,
The struggle's afoot and with quick pace
Approaches its consecrated end . . .

—verses in which we seem to hear the voices of the multitudes advancing through the turmoil and singing their certainty of a glorious future. Botev's writing captures the accents of pride and defiance that were to be heard on the lips of every Bulgarian emigrant and every citizen of Europe, ready to face death to free his country at the heart of a Europe in ferment. The cries went up in unison in the streets and in the taverns where the restless exiles gathered. The poet heard them. His verses move to the rhythm of history itself, up to the final shout—the cry of his time, and so also his own: 'Our cry is "Bread or a bullet send!".'

All the oppressed of Europe sent up the same despairing cry. But for those of Bulgaria who felt that national revolution was imminent, that cry had tangible meaning. Like a shudder it ran through the patriots and took hold of the poet; it was his obsession. And Botev bequeathed to future generations the proud, prophetic lines of 'The Struggle'.

THE LASH OF HISTORY

WHAT did Botev mean by the 'implacable logic of history'? The lyric poet answers first: 'Death to everything old, out of date or rotten and life to everything new, sound and human.' He pours scorn on the retrograde mob that tries in vain to halt the wheel of history, and issues both a challenge and a warning: 'Is it humanly possible to escape this doom and force nature to take a different course?'

He himself had no doubts: beneath the conflicts that set peoples against one another and the complex and violent tensions that rent society ('This realm of knavery, vice and disgrace'), he discerned 'the invincible advance of the soldiers of freedom'. Despite the difficulties, 'blood and sin', history was leading mankind towards a sure outcome, which he did not hesitate to call a 'consecrated end'. The social struggle, acting as the 'lash of history', ineluctably encouraged and stimulated progress. A historian might envy the poet's epic vision, as well as this dialectical insight from the journalist: 'The peoples are discontented with the present. Yesterday they wanted one thing, today they are looking for another! And everywhere man is being thrown into the struggle—the struggle

for freedom and truth! In that struggle, there are laughter and tears, good and evil. The struggle is the advance of mankind! Without it, the world would stagnate.' The struggle gives birth to the future, inspires the poet, elevates his thought, stirs his feelings as on the eve of a departure, and calls forth the lyrical phrase.

The poet subordinated his personal life to the 'implacable logic of history'; he joined the 'struggle against the unleashed elements' and, 'using his hands as hammers and his skin as a drum . . .', urged his contemporaries: 'Hasten to inscribe your name in the history of our liberation . . . The action of each one will be of the utmost importance to it.' This was another logical conclusion from his thinking: history was not a mechanical process; it advanced at the speed of the human beings who made it; every individual source of strength was part of historical destiny.

Botev, as the editor of *Znamc*, for whom 'all spiritual activity must be one with the life, sufferings and needs of the people', turned his attention to the history of mankind. The doors of science and literature were opened to him like that of his own home. Endowed with a remarkably wide range of thought and knowledge, he was as thoroughly at ease with ancient culture as amid the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century and with ideological and literary doctrines, in tracing 'the logical paths of social evolution'. Everything the poet wrote was a weapon to be used in the historical action.

Botev was the first in Bulgaria, and indeed in Europe, to define the precise role of the brothers Cyril and Methodius in the progress of mankind. He anticipated many specialists in discovering the social and rationalist seed in the heretical movement of the Bulgarian Bogomils, a movement that lent its written doctrine to the earliest pan-European popular resistance—the French and Italian

Cathars, the Albigenses, the Nordic Pfifles and the German Kätzer—against military and ecclesiastical feudalism between the tenth and fourteenth centuries.¹ ‘More than once, as in the days of Bogomil, the people have risen against the king and his clergy, showing the firmness of will that is characteristic of them’, concluded Botev. He went on to demonstrate the people’s role in history, whatever might be the form of the struggle against the clergy or its secular arm. Wherever history was given a push, Botev looked for the hand of the people. He searched avidly in mankind’s past, to reveal its invincible advance. He went back to Cambyzes and Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Caesar and Titus. He described the sufferings of the helots of ancient Greece, the victims of the Inquisition, the labourers in America and the proletariat in England. He analysed the policy of Napoleon I and censured the attitude and incapacity of Napoleon III, always highlighting the role of the people, the builders of history. He writes ironically of those who went to seek their fortunes in a new Klondyke and a latter-day California. He prophesied: ‘The present economic situation in Europe will sooner or later give rise to social rebellions there.’ Commenting on the European quarrels, he stated, with remarkable foresight for 1875, that only ‘general disarmament will—up to a point—preserve the general peace’.

After years of exile in Romania, Khristo Botev was the editor best informed on the situation in Bulgaria. A network of correspondents supplied his newspapers with facts as they gathered them, and he collated them ‘so that our every word may be founded on fact’. Every line he wrote reveals his analytical mind, his unfailing instinct

1. Cf. Vladimir Topentcharov, *Bougres et Cathares*, Paris, P. Seghers, 1971.

for the logic of history, his profound political intuition and the vast spectrum of his encyclopaedic knowledge. He invoked Goethe, Lope de Vega, Schiller, Byron, Newton, Fichte, Cuvier and Darwin as so many heroes of human development deployed against the zealots of ecclesiastical dogmatism, the orthodox John Chrysostom and the Catholic Loyola. He defended the poetry of Heinrich Heine against his Balkan plagiarists. He directed his sarcasm at the social faults and crimes committed by European Turcophiles within the Ottoman Empire. The reader can only marvel: was Botev really only 22 when he edited *The Word* and wrote 'The Struggle' and 26 when he founded *The Flag*?

Between the time when he heard the clanking chains of the slaves at Kalofer and plumbed the social depths of Odessa, and the time when he edited the newspapers *The Word* and *The Flag*, Khristo Botev's ideological development came under many influences that intersected, overlapped and sometimes ousted one another. But his thought bears no obvious stamp of any of the successive masters he followed in his youth. It was 'the school of life', and also the breadth of his knowledge, that fostered in this 'madman'—as the Philistines were to call him—the 'mania' for the logic of history, and also another obsession: love of the people, concern for their fate and their freedom, and a vocation for creative action.

This man who 'read until he could read no more' did not take other people's ideas at face value. Botev's mind was always at work; there was nothing ready-made about his ideas, nothing that he himself did not distil from the times; he saw everything with his own eyes, through 'the life, interests and needs of the people'. Botev never lifted his knowledge mechanically from books; he neither borrowed nor imitated; he despised anyone who used preconceived ideas, and called such a person an 'idolater'.

His own social experience was the source of the originality with which, as both poet and journalist, he apprehended and interpreted his time.

A life as short as it was stormy, exile and the daily struggle to make ends meet did not allow this emigrant to develop his thought by brushing in wide canvases, by writing long lyric or epic poems: only short works and newspaper articles have come down to us. But no matter; these closely worked pages bristle with trenchant arguments, aphorisms and premonitions that pierce straight to the heart of the main problem, far-sighted prophecies and visions whose breath 'propels the heavy bark of history'. The style of some of his writings recalls the thunder of the revolutionary democrats, the dreams of the Utopians and the stern judgements of the disciples of Proudhon and Bakunin.

In Odessa, Botev had pored long hours over the works of the Russian revolutionary democrats. But whereas some of them confined their analysis to 'the role of human nature', Botev focused on the social order; as he saw it, the evil lay neither in the 'nature' nor in the 'character of the Turk', but in the 'system', in the 'social order of the Sultan and the capitalist', which oppressed Turks, Bulgarians, Serbs and all other peoples alike. His logical mind caught on the wing the ideas that were in the air in Europe, and translated them into terms applicable to the Balkans; and the very Botev whose attitude was so hostile to the Turkish people in the columns of *The Word* wrote a little later in *The Flag*: 'The root of the evil that keeps Turkey from being reborn and thriving lies not in the Turkish national character but in all the rottenness of the social system.'

The editor of *The Word* and *The Flag* admired the master builders of freedom, in whichever country and at whatever time they lived. He bowed before the mortal

remains of Dombrowski; he admired Garibaldi; he dreamed of a Bulgarian Spartacus. In the first issue of *The Word* (he was 22 at the time), he published *Jugendschriften* (Talking about Children) by Ludwig Feuerbach. But in *The Flag* he went further and wrote of a human city that would be built on 'the rational doctrine of society' and 'the scientific principle of freedom'. He criticized the attitude of the followers of Bakunin in Spain, who advocated a 'policy of non-interference in political matters' and confined themselves to the trade-unionist struggle: 'They were wrong', he wrote, 'and they were to blame for the victory of the monarchy in Spain'.

From the remote villages that Romanian towns such as Galați, Braila and even Bucharest seemed at the time to Western eyes, this young man harassed by poverty and 'the wretchedness of the social environment', succeeded in sensing and keeping abreast of the trends of the day. He took the side of the defenders of national freedom against foreign domination in Italy; he lined up with the French patriots against the Prussian invader. The struggle for national liberation was not, in his view, one people's problem; the whole planet was the battlefield. Everything was interconnected and interdependent, joined across time and space. The works of Botev—poems and articles alike—express a vigorous dialectic: neither a contemplative nor a mere reporter, he explains and fights; through him, journalism and poetry come right into people's lives in order to transform them.

Once again, the reader may marvel: was Botev really only 25 when he wrote:

The bee first builds his wax comb and only later fills the cells with honey; the bird begins by weaving a nest, and then lays eggs and rears its brood; man strives first of all to satisfy his material needs and only later develops the will to refine his aspirations and abilities. A starving man does not think about

Solomon's temple, and a thirsty man gives little thought to the immortality of the soul. The proletariat has no use for Byronic syllogisms; someone who is destitute and half dead does not think about well-being—even that of his own children. To the victim of persecution, schooling is of scant importance.

Thus Botev linked the problem of freedom and of thought with material circumstances, and drew close to the new scientific ideas about freedom and social development. In his writings he reached this conclusion: 'Only when the people and mankind develop freely on the historical plane will the individual, in his turn, find his own freedom.'

Botev aspired to the principles of a new humanism—not that of the Renaissance, nor that trapped in the maxims of law. He desired a 'new political education' for the peoples; for it was a fact 'that a starving man does not study, that a man in chains is resistant to education, and that a man who is being beaten cannot sing'. 'The place of the Bulgarian people', he cried, 'is not in the tomb of their remote past but in the cradle of their future.' The sociologists were later to discover the truth which Botev, as poet and journalist, had already asserted with surprising foreknowledge when he wrote: 'The same hatred that the Bulgarian feels for the Turk, he also feels—in a deeper degree, perhaps, because of longer standing—for his rich compatriot and for the clergy, that stinking Byzantine trash, fit for the rubbish heap, that sold and ruined the people and wears around its neck the keys to their chains.' Here he expresses two historical truths, namely that social contradictions precede national contradictions, and that the guardian Bulgarian ruling class was wholly to blame for five centuries of occupation.

In an age when subjectivism was carried to extremes

and individual action highly popular, Botev became convinced that 'the century of the individual is long past, and mankind's struggle for freedom calls for many hands and many heads'. He went on to specify: 'In order to arouse enthusiasm and unite all popular forces in an effort to change the world, the first need is for people who are sincere, political militants fired by secular zeal, persons of integrity who are wholly reliable.'

Botev was one of those men of the latter half of the nineteenth century who disseminated new philosophical and political ideas and defended them boldly. In that historical era, when the nations of Europe were asserting their identity and when national self-interest was taking hold, as of right, in international relations, Botev was among the few who pointed to the danger of chauvinism. His burning patriotism arose from a sense of international brotherhood. His love for his people led him to love all the oppressed, without distinction as to race or nationality: 'All poor people and all workers, whatever their nationality and wherever they live, are brothers, brothers in suffering and adversity'; and again: 'The present order, that permits the existence of sultans . . . is the source of all suffering, for Turks and Bulgarians alike.' He launched this appeal: 'Whoever is a victim of the injustice of this social order, whoever is condemned by this order to contend with want and hunger, whoever hates his sub-human condition and wishes to be free of it, is our brother.'

Thus, according to a principle that Botev foresaw and proclaimed, true patriotism leads to internationalism, and genuine internationalism implies loyalty to country; national freedom can be attained only through closeness to other peoples. It was precisely this overflowing patriotism, characteristic of Khristo Botev's volcanic temperament, that drew him towards international brotherhood,

while his robust internationalism constantly strengthened his patriotism. However, while he regarded Bulgaria as part of the European continent, and wrote: 'We are children of Europe', he exercised discernment with regard to what was 'European', and added: 'We shall take from Europe whatever is useful, sound and humane.'

Botev's poetic talent and journalistic activity, placed in the service of his time, seem to spring from a profound foreknowledge of the future; that is why some have called him Utopian. He fully embodied the patriotic ideas of his time and by virtue of his social intuition transcended them. If he was sometimes Utopian in the present, he was realistic about the future.

In his poetic work of 1873, Khristo Botev reached a peak that literary critics were to hold the equal of the world's greatest masterpieces: the ballad *Hadzhi Dimit'r* known less by its title than by the exclamation in the first line: 'He's alive, he's alive!'

When the news broke among the people in 1871 that Hadzhi Dimit'r, the leader of a band of insurgents, had met his death, nobody could believe that this dynamic heroic man, a living legend, could have fallen—as if Hadzhi Dimit'r and death were two incompatible concepts. Despite Turkish dispatches stating that his head, impaled on a stake, had been exhibited as proof of his death, popular rumour insisted: 'He's alive, he's alive!' The poet took up this claim and explained it thus: the hero is alive in the minds of the people: he is alive because he fell in a fight for freedom. 'He's alive!' is a rallying cry, a statement of the people's faith in the immortality of the heroes who have sacrificed their lives on the altar of their country. Eternal life after the instant of physical death: this was the realistic interpretation of the otherwise incomprehensible Christian maxim 'death has triumphed over death'; death is not meaningless when it is accepted

in the name of life. The hero goes on living through his sacrifice; and Botev was later to express that certainty in two lines which immediately became famous:

He does not die who falls in battle,
Fighting for freedom.

The very year that the band of rebels led by Hadzhi Dimit'r was defeated, Botev wrote in *The Word*: 'They died, but . . . they live on in our hearts.' For four years, this idea matured in his mind like a pearl in an oyster. Polished and polished again, it would adorn the poem like a shining gem: 'He's alive, he's alive . . .!' Tenderness, freshness and beauty of form, the poet's art exalts the philosophical idea, the logical conclusion of his thinking about the meaning of individual sacrifice as part of the epic of a people. The poem begins with a funereal trumpet blare, followed by a soft *adagio doloroso*, while flags at half mast stream in the wind. But the sorrow and the tears shed over the hero's remains are eclipsed by the beauty of life—the mountains, blue sky and golden wheat, the song of the reapers, life in all its splendour. And there goes up, like an earthly alleluia or the majestic chords of a psalm to life, the refrain that has been repeated *ad infinitum*:

He does not die who falls in battle,
Fighting for freedom. Everything mourns him,
Both earth and heaven, wild beast and nature,
And of him minstrels sing their songs.

Romanticism creeps into the picture, as though forming a natural part of the whole. Everything is real: he who has fallen for freedom, the wild beast licking his wounds to relieve his sufferings, the bird spreading its wings to shelter him from the sun and the nymphs binding his wounds.

This is not a man dying; it is death itself, death that is powerless to subdue the indomitable. Not only can

'power do nothing against heads that, for the freedom and happiness of all mankind, are willing to be struck from their shoulders', but death itself is vanquished.

In the poem *Hadzhi Dimit'r*, Botev reveals the philosophical meaning of individual achievement as an organic part of the common struggle for freedom, and as the link between one's homeland and the world. The ground on which the hero is lying stretches 'to infinity', and becomes one with the 'earth itself'. The hero lying on the grass in the clearing seems to be at the centre of the world. His mouth speaks to 'the universe' where man is in bondage; the song arises from the calvary of his native land, where he is dying, to hover above the earth and proclaim the universal relevance of the heroic fighter's selflessness. Soon, moreover, Botev was to write with his journalist's pen: 'He who dies for freedom does not die for his country only, but for the whole world!'

We feel in the words, the metre and the clear alert rhymes of the song that the man who has fallen for freedom really is alive and acting, through his death, on the living. Such mortals do not close their eyes in 'eternal sleep', weary of life:

We do not die to sleep, but to do more
In Heaven than does our humble sphere below . . .

wrote Victor Hugo almost at the same time, confining the scope of his lines to his own immediate world. Botev's immortal mortal 'will live for ever' in the universe of humble living people. His poem, as finely chiselled as a cameo, describes the suffering of mankind throughout history and its yearning towards life and freedom—the yearning not only of people who are downtrodden on the national and political plane, but also of man as a slave to himself. And the following stanza gleams at the heart of this ballad:

Evening draws down, and the moon rises,
 Stars bespangle the vault of the sky;
 The forest rustles, a wind awakens,
 The mountain is singing a haiduk song.

This quatrain, that everyone knows by heart, is adorably gentle and evocative, while at the same time universal drive and historical vigour are expressed in its last line: 'The mountain is singing a haiduk song . . .' as though the whole crag rose gigantic in the night, crowned with flags and vibrant with a warrior's song to assuage an eternal human aspiration. . . . The verse resounds like an epitome of the people's destiny, like an echo of their age-long history, and like the emblem of their indomitable thought that sings 'for freedom'.

Moreover, all the world's peoples have known such an epic; they have all risen, at some time in their history, against an enemy who oppressed them or sought to do so. Botev sums up their common destiny with supreme brevity and 'dreadful power'. Therefore this poem has been handed on from people to people, in a growing number of translations, and sounds a Bulgarian note in the great chorus of world poetry. Alas! In all the translations of this ballad there is always something lacking; only the idea is preserved, while its subjective power is weakened. Even in the French adaptation by so talented a lyric poet as Paul Éluard, the tones are diluted: the colours are those of a landscape painter, whereas in reality Botev's poem seems to be cut in marble with a sharp chisel driven by emotion and reason.

ALIVE OR DEAD, WE SHALL REMAIN

THE works of Khristo Botev, whose brightness illumined a decade, are the outcome of a spiritual journey pursued with great self-discipline. Analysing his own work, he said that his mother had instilled in his youthful heart the love of folk-song and heroic poetry. 'I studied Pushkin, Byron and Lermontov', he wrote. His intellectual development was swift, for he had little time. From folk poetry, which he adopted spontaneously, he progressed to a lyricism that had nothing abstract about it. Life was the nutrient medium for his work. His poetry has come down to us and will continue to live for future generations because he was more than any other a man of his time, because he gave expression to the struggle and ideals of the Bulgarian people and of his contemporaries. A poet of national revolution, he mirrored the trends of universal history. His work as poet and journalist was crowned by his social and political action, and by his death in the service of an ideal. Poetry, life and death, he merged into one; hence his immortality.

Botev the youth saw freedom through the prism of song; Botev the adult saw song through the prism of freedom. Henceforth all his poems hymned the people's

aspiration for freedom, and that of man, the creator of mankind. For Botev, they were the instruments of popular action and he regarded them as propaganda. They were not intended to satisfy his creative ambition, but to rouse the people to awareness.

Hadzhi Dimit'r was printed in *The Wall Calendar* for 1875. Hence the words of this ballad were to be found in every home, and each morning they were seen by anyone who checked the date. They were intended to stir peoples' minds everyday, like the sound of a bell or like a prayer affirming faith in freedom. Characteristic of Botev, as of Hugo, Pushkin and Mayakovsky, is this ceaseless communication of ideas and feelings between poet and reader, a constant exchange of thoughts, impulses and passions.

'The people' are omnipresent in Botev's poetry. They do not encroach upon the poet's private, personal life but are welded to it and built into it. Unlike those who believe, like Lamartine, that

To think, you must draw apart from the crowd;
To act, you must join it,

Botev thinks in the middle of the crowd, in order to act simultaneously with it. The crowd is, in a sense, his workshop.

Botev did not cut himself off from the world in order to write. He produced all his creative work in the course of his everyday life, and his verses matured in his mind amid the contacts that such a life entails. He then brought them forth as a mother gives birth to a child. According to his friends, 'he began to recite his verse in snatches and isolated sentences; then they gradually took shape'. This polishing process did not stem from any lack of assurance on his part, but showed the pains he took to make his

work accessible and compelling. Botev sat down to write when the poetic fruit was ripe; he wrote without slips or corrections, he muttered his verses aloud, and the work was finished.

This most inspired of Bulgarian poets did not write under the spell of inspiration. All his poems are of the occasional kind, and correspond to an event. Botev's entire output disproves the spurious aesthetic theory that 'great' and 'eternal' poetry wells up from unknown psychological sources. The closer the poet's involvement with society, the stronger are his feelings and the ingredients customarily called inspiration. 'On Parting' was written in the revolutionary atmosphere that prevailed among the emigrants in 1868 when Botev was preparing to go and fight in his home country. In the poem he was saying farewell to his mother and his beloved. The ballad 'He's Alive, He's Alive!' was written after the disbandment of the group of insurgents led by Stefan Karadja and Hadzhi Dimit'r; 'Sharing' was the result of an ideological dispute between Botev and Lyuben Karavelov, one of the leaders of the Bulgarian national movement. In Botev the poet and the historical figure, the poet and the political militant, the poet and the revolutionary thinker merge, united and indivisible. Thought gives rise to a poetic flight which in turn prompts the thinker to new action and produces original ideas in the journalist. From poet to revolutionary to journalist: such is Botev's cycle of spiritual activity. It constitutes a sort of trinity in which mind, heart and inspiration are in harmony. Botev's friends said that, when he was muttering a new poem, he would listen in order to learn whether he was being followed and echoed by his hearers. In order to write the poem down, he needed to like it when he heard it spoken by his audience. He did not regard poetry as a game or an amusing hobby. Through his works, he strove

to penetrate deeper and deeper into the soul of the people; he discovered historical truths, sought new ways of fighting for freedom, and charted lines of action.

Botev's poems are short, direct as a punch, and totally free from affectation, so as to be immediately comprehensible even to the most ignorant. Their language is clear, so that each word may be a 'living word', a rousing word. He uses very few adjectives, working like a painter who uses patches of colour only to accentuate the shape of things. Certain nouns are never accompanied by qualifiers; thus the word 'mother' is of such profound, expressive and moving connotation as to need no epithets. Again, adjectives are scarcely ever used with the words 'homeland' and 'freedom', which need no adornment, Botev detests epithets that weaken the sense.

Botev's writing is inaccessible to anyone who comes to it with grammar in hand, for it breaks the rules. His phrases are rugged, harsh, firm and yet flexible, warm, smooth and gentle. They forge a new style, peculiar to him and a stumbling block for translators, who find themselves at a loss when they try to translate it word for word. Even Paul Éluard confessed himself incapable of translating these image-studded and strongly rhyming verses, and he was able to convey their meaning only by resorting to free verse.

In order to translate Botev it is necessary to understand him and re-create him—in his spirit, with his skill and his ardour. His poetry is like a perpetually leaping flame, sometimes burning, sometimes caressing. There is something in him that flouts the formal rules of language, that seems to defy logic and that creates so strict a dialectical structure that it is impossible to change anything in his verse, even the position of a word.

His choice of terms is severe, even crude at times. Like Heinrich Heine and Georg Harwig, he does not

hesitate, in his poetry or in his journalistic prose, to call servile people 'slaves' or to call idiots idiots, without detracting from the poetic magic of his verse or the cogency of his prose.

Drawn as they are from the ordinary language of the people, the specific words that Botev uses are better calculated to exalt and move than insipid adjectives or terms. Their rawness does not diminish the emotional force of his poetry or its imposing beauty. An example from 'In the Tavern':

I'll drink, to spite the enemy
And to spite you, patriots!
Nothing dear is left to me:
As for you—you're idiots!

'Idiots' is a word that often recurs, too, in the writing of Arthur Rimbaud. Thus Botev and Rimbaud were united in poetry, not only in the days of the 'terrible year' but also in the terms they used. Just as Rimbaud was dubbed a 'crank' by his opponents, Botev was called 'madman' by the Philistines.

Besides protest and exaltation, there is a spurt of laughter in Botev's poems directed at the behaviour of the timid and cowardly. Humour and wit leaven his poetry and his articles. His laughter is now fresh and lively, now thunderous or sarcastic, now mocking, cynical or angry. Anger makes the poet, said the Romans. Botev proclaims: 'My outraged laughter rings through the columns of "The Flag".'

He believed that laughter was an integral part of the struggle against everything outdated and rotten in human society. 'If there is any laughter here', he repeats, 'it must be found in the advance of human reason, in the evolution of history . . . That which only yesterday was an unshakeable truth, an indispensable requirement, is today

a harmful prejudice. That which was regarded as Utopian is now an historical fact.'

When *The Word* had ceased publication, Botev was imprisoned at Focsani. After his release he worked on the newspapers *Freedom* and *Independence*. His laughter rang out, in particular, in 1873 in the columns of his humorous newspaper *The Alarm-Clock*, whose three issues furnish signal proof of the importance that Botev attached to laughter in the struggle against everything history rejected. For Botev laughter was an instrument of progress, a weapon against the outworn past that clung to life, that hung on at all costs, and whose doggedness in blocking the way to human progress drew from his pen a withering ridicule that he himself, to stress its force, called 'malicious laughter'.

In *The Alarm-Clock*, Botev published stinging satire and mordant verse. His poem 'St George's Day' is an example; a dark and acerbic satire in which the poet deplores the situation of the oppressed country, 'over there' where 'laughter turns into an oath' and 'satire into a curse'. 'St George's Day' begins with a quotation from Pushkin:

Go on grazing, then, good people,
You'll not wake at honour's call;
Why give flocks the gifts of freedom?
They're to be slaughtered or else shorn.

And Botev takes up the theme:

And on went the flock with its lambkins small—
So tired and wayworn they trudge and they plod,
The young next day to be put to the knife—
For whom?—for Saint George—that brigand of God . . .
That poor rotten corpse, so long without life,
Is it victims he wants? It's the shepherd's demand,
Of gaping gullets and the drunken priest;

So on you, the people, the king of the land
 Makes demands his vile harem to feast
 And all those by whom you're racked and stripped;
 Their welfare with sweat and with blood you secure
 And dance in them even when you are whipped!

Rejoice, O people! The sheep bleat so
 When they with the dogs in their shepherd's steps go.

Botev's satire, whether mocking, ironic, scintillating or anecdotal in form, invigorates his thought, sharpens its outline and adorns it with images that impress themselves on the reader's mind with the force of self-evident truths. For example, in his article entitled 'Evil', Botev turned his crushing sarcasm on the feudal Ottoman State, then in process of disintegration and compared it to a 'body eaten alive by worms, in terrible agony yet wishing, through the wriggling of the worms, to flutter a little longer'.

Botev's satire was not prompted solely by his tenacious struggle against the enemies of freedom and of the people. Botev was one of those humanists who are not content merely to note the existence of evil and slavery, but must castigate them. He was ready to go to the stake for his conviction that freedom would conquer. He fought relentlessly against everything 'that was yesterday'. He was in constant conflict with his contemporaries who feared to attack the 'gospel truths' that had been established for centuries. 'The march was dreadful', but it alone led onwards to life. Victory made the sacrifices worthwhile. 'Dead or alive, we shall remain', wrote Botev; and these words have the ring of a rational conclusion.

THE PRAYER OF REASON

THIS poet's work is a compound of love and hate, of burning passions and unquenchable enthusiasm; but feelings never overshadow reason. On the contrary, reason backed by learning and 'the implacable logic of history' are the guides of thought and emotion. In the poem 'My Prayer' Botev utters a cry—

O my God . . .
God of reason!

—that rises to the heavens to make the earth tremble.

Botev's 'God of reason' has nothing in common with Reason as deified by Robespierre and transformed into a supreme being. The century that had elapsed since 1793 had swept mysticism away. Reason, in Botev's poem, is not an imaginary figure; it is the meaning of life characteristic of the rationalist and materialist nineteenth century; it is deductive logic; it is analytical thought, which explains things and events, alters the foundations of society and 'makes history'. It is not deified reason but earthly reason, brought down from the heaven of social Utopias and applied on earth to human actions and to relations between individuals.

Written in 1873 and jokingly entitled 'My Prayer', this poem bears no resemblance to the bantering, facetious ditties which were fashionable after the Paris Commune, and in which the French people, using laughter as a weapon, took their revenge for the military defeat suffered on their country's frontiers. Botev's work, in contrast, is a hymn glorifying freedom for enslaved man.

The 'God' in the poet's work, 'Whose day the nations soon shall honour', is

The living love of freedom . . .

This God, who will give man the strength 'to fight . . . against the peoples' foes', who will not 'leave a glowing heart to cool in foreign lands' or let his voice 'unheeded pass as over desert sands'—this God of reason is not a celestial abstraction. He lives in man himself:

O my God, the true God
Not you, in heaven above,
But you, my God, who are within me,
In my heart and soul . . .

'My Prayer' expresses Botev's faith in justice, freedom and the free spirit of man and reflects his ideology, his creative materialism and his faith in human reason. It is a moving poem, full of lyricism, vibrant with thought that, like a bird, soars singing into space. It is a spontaneous work, impressive in its simplicity, clear to the point of incisive transparency.

O my God, the true God
.
.
.
Strengthen my arm also,
That, when the slave revolts . . .

Even the closing lines of the stanza—

In the ranks of the struggle
I too may find my grave!

do not sound like a dying groan but like a call to arms, in the name of life and the victory of the free.

Death is a theme that recurs in other poems of Botev, such as 'On Parting', 'Sharing' ('to death, brothers, to death to go!'), or 'To My First Love' ('Death is there . . . sweet repose'). This should be regarded not as the expression of pessimism in a man who calls upon death to release him from life and its suffering, but, on the contrary, as challenging death to single combat in which 'the heavy tragedy' of life must yield and be vanquished. This invocation of death is not a sign of fatalism; it does not imply a longing for rest as an end to the weariness of living; it reflects neither scepticism nor despair; it is inspired by manly courage, burning faith and a quest for the ideal.

When Botev speaks of death he uses simple words that express awareness of a harsh struggle day by day, hour by hour, without respite or truce, 'until the grave'. He is like the lovers who vow to be faithful unto death. Botev, the lover of freedom, swears to fight 'until the grave' in the name of life and to win freedom for the people and the individual in bondage. When he swears to 'find his grave in the ranks of struggle' he is motivated not by love of death but by faithfulness to life.

Consequently, whenever death brutally snatches someone from the ranks of the struggle, Botev reacts with verses that voice his sorrow or express his ardour. But from his pen there also flows the hope that he who has fallen for freedom and life will not have died in vain. Thus Botev was to take up, with renewed vigour, the refrain of the ballad *He's Alive, He's Alive!* when the Ottoman soldiery arrested Vasil Levski, the leader of the revolutionary people's organization within the country and

hanged him. Levski, who was known as 'the deacon', had renounced his vows to join the national struggle, and stopped his ears to 'the hymn of the cherubim' in order to fling himself into the inferno of the human tragedy.

Vasil Levski and Khristo Botev lived together for a time as emigrants—friends who thought alike, united by hunger and destitution. Botev admired Levski's temperament and his attachment to life even in the darkest of hours, and in his turn the rough-and-ready organizer loved the poet. In Levski's notebook the Turks found Botev's poem 'He's Alive, He's Alive!', in the original version but already containing the lines: 'He does not die who falls in battle fighting for freedom.' And it was with this thought of Botev that Levski mounted the gallows that had been erected near the Church of Saint Sofia.

Levski's hanging tore from Botev his last song. It resounds with the lament of the whole country that has lost 'one of its sons':

O mother mine, dear native land,
Why are you sadly, mournfully weeping?
And you, raven, accursed bird,
On whose grave are you so direly croaking?

The raven, that 'accursed bird'—which often appears in the works of another poet of world renown, alighting on the heads of statues and cawing in sinister fashion on tombstones—that bird of ill omen hovers dismally, in Botev's poem, over a Bulgaria plunged into mourning where

Old men pray fervently to God,
Women are weeping, children screaming

and still the raven croaks hideously of ill omen. Dogs and wolves are howling on the plain. Nature herself stoops over her dead son to place on his tomb a martyr's wreath:

Squalls chase the thistles in the plain
 And cold and frost and hopeless tears
 Wring and twist your heart with pain.

Thus weeps the poet before the black gallows. But his grief is no longer the tears of the youth who once sought consolation in his mother's arms. It is full of menace; it is the grief of an adult poet who has forged for himself an unshakeable hope despite the cruel last sufferings:

O mother mine, dear native land

. . .
 Weep! over there, hard by Sofia town,
 A black gallows I have seen standing,
 And one of your sons, Bulgaria,
 Hangs from it with dreadful power.

The people's guide hangs there with a power that cannot be broken, even in death. Even when the body has ceased living, the spirit lives on. In his pain the poet discovers once again the immortality of the man who has died for the people. He who has fallen does not die; not only does he remain in peoples' memories, not only will minstrels sing of him, but by the very fact of his death he will act, and more powerfully than ever, on his human brothers, and will guide them in their struggle for life.

On 17 May 1876 Botev crossed the 'calm white Danube' in a last decisive gesture that ensured that he would act for ever, down through the ages, with 'dreadful power' on the living.

THE CROSSING TO IMMORTALITY

ON a fine day in May some passengers were pacing up and down the landing stage at the Romanian port of Giurgiu. Their gaze was fixed on the peacefully flowing waters of the Danube, but they were uneasy. Was not the boat late? Would they be taken on board? From time to time they glanced at their luggage—small wooden cases, strongly bound with iron.

When at last the boat arrived, the travellers carried their cases aboard very carefully, as if they contained sacred vessels or priceless relics.

The scene repeated itself at Beket. When the passengers had placed their cases on the deck, they stood beside them in silence. From time to time a meaningful glance brought a smile to their manly faces.

Just who were these disciplined passengers, on 17 May 1876, standing so silently on the vessel *Radetzky* flying the Austrian flag?

Their nerves were strained to breaking point. As they waited for the blast on the siren announcing that the boat had crossed the frontier, they were consumed with impatience. At last the bows clove the rapid flow of the beautiful river. When the Bulgarian bank appeared in the

distance, a strange noise of splintering wood broke out on the deck. The boards of the stoutly banded cases flew apart. Neither chalices, pyxes nor priestly vestments were drawn forth by the anonymous travellers, but rebel uniforms, and weapons that gleamed in the May sunshine. They donned the uniforms, adjusted their belts and seized the rifles.

Their flag bore, in gold-embroidered letters, the legend: 'Freedom or death'. Botev stood among them, in a close-fitting dolman that set off his youthful good looks. Dressed as if for a gala, the travellers headed for the 'freedom festival' on the other bank.

These armed men were the sons of a people in revolt, on their way to support the insurrection. They knew that for the past two weeks there had been fighting in the villages and mountains of Bulgaria. This was the popular rising of April 1876. And these 200 men had set out with the idea of crossing the threshold of the new era that was dawning the other side of the great river. Only a few days before the crossing, Khristo Botev had written in *New Bulgaria*:

This is the voice of the Bulgarian people, desperate but manly: a people of 7 million souls who for five centuries have borne on their shoulders the burden of the most inhuman slavery in Europe. Today they rise up and demand a reply to this choice: freedom or death!

Such is the inescapable logic of history, whose verdict prescribes the abolition of everything that is old, rotten and out of date, but life for everything that is new, sound and humane. Who can cancel this verdict of history and compel nature to take a different course?

Freedom is indivisible. This idea, cherished by Botev, that a people's struggle was one with the struggle of all mankind, now inspired the 200 men who stood on the deck of the *Radetzky* facing the dumbfounded passengers and crew.

Two hundred men crossed the river with the idea of entering a new era. Botev had given his latest newspaper the title of *New Bulgaria*, not to suggest a resurrection of the old Bulgarian kingdom, but because he realized that Bulgaria was approaching a new future.

The Austrian archives have kept the letter that Botev handed to Captain Engländer, demanding transport for his 200 freedom fighters to the opposite bank. It is written in French. Its text bears witness to the sense of honour of these men who were inspired by one of the noblest beings of the century:

Captain and passengers,

I have the honour to inform you that there are on board some Bulgarian rebels, whose voivode [leader] I have the honour to be.

At the cost of our livestock, of our farm implements, of great efforts, and at the sacrifice of our possessions—in short, at the cost of everything we hold most dear in this world—we have obtained (unknown to and despite the action of the authorities of the country whose neutrality we have respected) what we needed in order to come to the aid of our insurgent brothers who are fighting so valiantly under the Bulgarian lion for the freedom and independence of our dear homeland—Bulgaria.

We beg the passengers not to be alarmed, and to remain calm. As for you, Mr Captain, it is my painful duty to invite you to place the vessel at my disposal until we disembark, and at the same time to inform you that the slightest opposition on your part would unhappily compel me to use force and, against my inclination, to exact revenge for the appalling event that took place on the vessel *Germania* at Ruschuk in 1867.

In either case, our war-cry is:

Long live Bulgaria!

Long live Franz Josef!

Long live Count Andrassy!

Long live Christian Europe!

On board ship, 17 May 1876

H. BOTIOV

The authenticity of the letter is attested in a few words written in the margin in German by Captain Engländer and his subordinates:

	Engländer, Captain	
Dojmi	Kapor	Hasdel
Mate	Ticket inspector	Chief Engineer

Next day Captain Engländer would make a pathetic attempt to justify himself to his hierarchical superiors, who blamed him for handing over control of the vessel. But on 17 May 1876 he humbly obeyed the orders of the 200 brave men who had set out to immolate themselves in the arena of freedom. The passengers on the *Radetzky*—the ‘freedom vessel’—would always remember the insurgents’ nobility of soul.

Despite the diplomatic wiles of Count Andrassy and of the governments in the European capitals, Botev in his letter addressed an appeal to Christian Europe and by extension to all the peoples of Europe. In the last lines he ever wrote, he affirmed that Bulgarian freedom was inseparable from freedom throughout the world. This remained his ideological position as he crossed over to immortality, and he expressed it in a letter addressed to the *Journal de Genève* and to *La République française*:

Two hundred valiant Bulgarians under the command of Khristo Botev, editor of the newspaper *The Flag*, the organ of the revolutionary party, today took over the Austrian vessel *Radetzky* and compelled it to ferry them across the Danube. They landed on the right bank between the towns of Rahovo and Lom Palanka, unfurled a banner bearing the device: ‘Freedom or Death’, and set off to aid their insurgent Bulgarian brothers, who have long been fighting a 500 year-old tyranny for their human freedom and for the people’s rights. They are confident that the civilized European people and governments will stretch out a brotherly hand to them.

History has not recorded the names or life stories of these 200 heroes of freedom. But are not the nameless heroes the greatest of all, since they do not seek for glory? Most of them went off without writing farewell letters, without shedding tears and without leaving any address, for their appointment with their hearts' desire: freedom.

Botev himself left his family without embraces, tears or goodbyes. On board the *Radetzky* he wrote his beloved wife a short letter expressing, as in his poem 'To My First Love', the idea that love moves woman and man to advance with a firm step towards a common goal. Struggle does not preclude or supplant love. It gives love its meaning. A vision of possible death flickers momentarily in his mind, but life remains his dominant theme: 'God will preserve me, and if I survive we shall be the happiest people in this world.'¹

From the 'freedom vessel' Khristo Botev also sent a letter to his friends. He wrote it on his knees amid the swirling eddies of the old river and the hubbub of the passengers:

Soon 200 throats will shout 'Long live Bulgaria!' The feelings which have filled my soul make a lion of me. I am touched by the love and devotion of my comrades. Our device is: heroism and magnanimity.

Work, brothers, work! Now is the time to show our capacities and our patriotism. We are fortunate that even the slightest capacities may find an arena and obtain a glorious name among our people. Hasten to inscribe your name in the history of our liberation!

I am merry and my joy knows no bounds when I remember that 'My Prayer' is coming true.¹

History, as Botev saw it in all his work as poet and journalist, was now being made. 'Hasten . . .', he wrote.

1. *Khristo Botev: A Selection*, op. cit.

The time was ripe for men to take decisive historic action. From that moment on, everything depended on their valour.

As always, idea, poetry and revolutionary action were inseparable in Botev. He had written:

O my God, the true God!

· · ·
God of reason,

· · ·
Strengthen my arm also . . .

Now the time had come to act, and he joined the fray. Now 'the God of reason' gave him and his 200 companions the strength and firmness for which he had asked.

This was no mere adventure he was undertaking. He was opposed to individual acts of insurrection, and his aim in setting out with this group of enthusiasts was to join forces with the mass of the people.

The vessel nosed into the sand on the right bank of the Danube, near the village of Kozlodui. 'Here is our new port of call—Bulgaria', wrote Botev. The gangway was lowered. The 200 heralds of life walked down it to the bank. Moved by instinct—no one had suggested that they should do this—they knelt and kissed the ground. A historic gesture and a moving one.

Save that of their native soil, there was no welcome for them. Their information about the popular uprising was wrong; only a few scattered areas had risen. By the time the 200 enthusiasts reached the forests of Stara Planina, the insurrection had been crushed by the occupying hordes. They, too, were wiped out; only a few escaped with the memory of the kiss bestowed on the green bank of the Danube.

Perhaps Levski, the organizer of the revolutionary movement in Bulgaria, had been right to stress, before he

died, the importance of preparing the people over a long period and organizing the insurrection in minute detail. But Botev too was right in affirming that the dead men acted 'with dreadful power' on the living. A still more dreadful power, perhaps, when the death was voluntary.

When the April and May rising had been stamped out and Botev was dead, the eyes of Europe were on the destiny of the Bulgarian people. The action of Botev's armed band was not the dying convulsion of a defeated people. It was the apotheosis of the Bulgarian people's struggle for freedom. The entire European press came to their defence. More than 3,000 articles appeared in 200 newspapers. They told of the insurrection and the 200 heralds of freedom with whom Botev had crossed the Danube. In Parliament and in the press, Victor Hugo championed the cause of the Bulgarian people with all the strength of his generous heart and with all his indignant wrath. Without mentioning Botev by name, he defended the memory of a genius. Faced with the ghostly spectacle of the gory terror visited on the Bulgarians, he wrote in *Rappel*: 'The future is a god drawn by tigers.' Nekraszov, Dostoevski and Turgenev also defended the martyred people.

The French journalist Émile de Girardin, in his turn, issued this appeal: 'What is Russia waiting for? Why does not Russia intervene?'

Soon Russia would indeed intervene.

The death of Botev and his companions triggered the final military intervention that brought national freedom to the Bulgarian people.

In death Botev was united with nature that he so loved. An enemy bullet felled him in the mountains and no one knows what became of his remains. The earth, like a mother, gathered him in her arms. And as in one

of his poems, the rising generations, in love with freedom,
have been seeking for more than a century:

His white flesh on the cliffs
And in the eyries of eagles
And his black blood in the earth
In the black earth, O mother!

The bard of freedom rests in the earth he hymned, and
from there he continues to act with 'dreadful power' on
the living.

HE'S ALIVE STILL

DURING the Second World War, Nikola Vaptzarov, another Bulgarian poet, who was later shot by the fascist butchers, wrote:

Look closely at life—
You will find Botev there,
A whole poem rises from it . . .

In these verses, 'Botev' rhymes with the Bulgarian word for 'life'. All Botev's work was a reflection of life, that 'dreadful but glorious march' of which he sang. Like the man of whom he wrote: 'He's alive, he does not die!', Botev too is still living.

His writing is addressed to one and all, appealing to what is best in the human heart. 'His words are in the air we breathe.' Botev acts; he is alive.

Many of his poems have become folk songs: 'Hadzhi Dimit'r', 'My Prayer', 'The Hanging of Vasil Levski', 'To My Brother', 'In the Tavern', 'To My Mother', 'To My First Love', 'Eloped', 'On Parting', 'Sharing', etc. In this form Botev's thought has reached the people and given them food for reflection and inspiration. Some of his poems even appear in folk-song collections without

the author's name. This shows how thoroughly they have been adopted by the people as part of their poetic and musical folklore. Thus folk-song, which inspired Botev, returned to the people after he had re-created it.

The folk-singers took over his poems without knowing who the author was. They found them familiar, as though they had always carried them in their hearts. For this reason, even when they were forbidden by fascist governments, they were not forgotten. Their popularity, far from waning, steadily increased. The people spontaneously made Botev's songs the vehicle of their hopes of freedom, their suffering and their yearnings. A fine work of art may be buried, but a work inspired by noble ideals is immortal. So it has been with Botev's poetry. His poems, turned into songs, have survived precisely because of the powerful love for the people and for man that animates them and because of the powerful hatred they express for the enemies of freedom.

Botev's work carried within it the seeds of the new European literatures that were to look beyond the national horizon to that of the whole planet. Hence Botev left only his mortal remains on the mountain slopes. His songs spread throughout his native country and soon crossed its frontiers. The 'living word' of Botev is indeed alive.

Yes, Botev, his ideas and his songs are still alive. All Bulgarian poets, even those who did not share his opinions when he was alive, have dedicated at least one of their works to this lover of freedom, this symbol of the creative mind that was Botev. Resorted to whenever freedom needed to be extolled, his poems have been translated into French, Russian, Italian, English, Czech, Polish, Romanian and Serbo-Croat; they have been sung in Spanish, Arabic, Greek, Mongolian, Albanian, German and even Turkish; in Norwegian and Swedish besides. They have made the welkin ring in Vietnam, China, Cuba and India. By 1952

Botev's songs had been translated into fourteen languages; when Asia took the road of freedom and the peoples of Africa began to stir, the figure increased to thirty-eight; and it is still rising.

Curiously enough Khristo Botev has also been translated into Latin. The Latin version of his poems reveals their classicism. The powerful, limpid and rhythmic Latin iambics are particularly apt in conveying their purity and loftiness of thought.

The contemporary Greek poet Janis Ritsos has written: 'The poetry of great poets such as Botev and our Solomos is immortal. At whatever moment a person has the good fortune to be introduced to it, or to discover it for himself, it acts on what is finest in him.'

Botev's name, invoked at many symposia on peace and national and universal freedom, cited by many an eminent writer, is engraved in the memory of all. It sent out powerful echoes in 1976, the centenary of his death on the altar of freedom.

Botev entered history at the age of 18, 'a splendid, beardless young man with the face of a girl'. At 28, a veteran of the struggle for freedom, he gained immortality. These two events were less than a decade apart, but the entire nineteenth century is contained in his work. Botev knew that human beings needed enthusiasm and hope, and he gave them to those who loved life and freedom.

And now, if we were to ask ourselves who Botev was, we would have to reply: he is life!

And if we were to ask further 'For what did Botev live and give his life?', we would reply: for the freedom of man and of creative mankind!

Botev? Botev is life. Botev is one cry: freedom!

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1848

6 January, birth of Khristo Botev, eldest son of Botyo Petkov, teacher, and Ivanka Boteva, at Kalofer.

1863

Botev goes to Odessa, Russia, to continue his education.

1865

He is expelled from the Odessa Lycée.

1865-66

Botev works as a tutor in a Polish family while studying at the University of Odessa.

1867

Returning to his native town of Kalofer in January, Botev takes over his father's teaching post. The newspaper *Gaïda* (Bagpipes) publishes his first poem, 'To My Mother', at Istanbul.

He leaves Kalofer in September to begin life as an emigrant in Romania.

In December he joins the newspaper *Dunavska zora* (Dawn over the Danube) as a compositor.

1868

Botev belongs to Zhelu Voïvoda's group of Bulgarian insurgents. The authorities forbid them to enter Bulgaria. Botev, still in Romania, joins Dobri Voinikov's acting troupe at Bucharest; at the same time he studies at the Higher Academy of Medicine, but soon leaves.

Botev works as a schoolteacher in the villages of Alexandria and Ismail in Romania. He collaborates on the satirical newspaper *T''pan* (Drum).

1870

An eventful period of revolutionary activity. Botev publishes some poetical works.

1871

Sojourn in the towns of Galați and Braila in Romania. Botev is editor of the newspaper *Duma na b''lgarskite emigranti* (The Word of the Bulgarian Emigrants).

1873

He establishes relations with Russian and Romanian revolutionaries.

Arrested for his revolutionary activities, he spends three months in prison at Focsani.

As editor of the *émigré* newspaper *Svoboda* (Freedom), he writes articles and contributes to the satirical page.

1874

Botev publishes poems and topical columns in the newspaper *Nezavisimost* (Independence).

He teaches at the Bulgarian school in Bucharest.

1875

Botev abandons his teaching career in order to devote himself entirely to revolutionary activities among the Bulgarian emigrants; he becomes a member of the

Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee. He is editor of the newspaper *Zname* (The Flag), the organ of the Bulgarian emigrants' revolutionary party (December 1874 to September 1875).

Marriage to Veneta Vezireva (July).

Botev leaves the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee, of whose methods he disapproves (September).

With Stefan Stambolov, another Bulgarian revolutionary poet, he publishes the collection of poems entitled *Songs and Poems* (September).

His last poem, 'The Hanging of Vasil Levski', appears in *The Wall Calendar*, 1876.

1876

Birth of his daughter Ivanka (13 April).

Journey to Russia to raise funds in order to arm a band of men to go to Bulgaria. In April-May the so-called April Rising breaks out in Bulgaria as the culmination of the Bulgarian people's struggle for national independence.

On 18 May the newspaper *Nova B'lgaria* (New Bulgaria) begins publication.

Botev is appointed chief of the group that is to go to the aid of the Bulgarian insurgents.

On 30 May he and his group seize the Austrian vessel *Radetzky* in order to cross the Danube; with his companions he lands on the Bulgarian bank, near the village of Kozlodui.

On 31 May, first clash between Botev's band and Turkish troops in the Milinkamak area.

On 2 June, last battle. Shot in the chest, Botev dies. His grave remains unknown.

